

HOME NOOK

THE FIRST NOVEL BY AMANDA M. DOUGLAS

AMANDA M. DOUGLAS

1 3 7 B

125

40

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



"I WONDER IF ANY ONE EVER WAS THANKFUL FOR TROUBLE AND MISFORTUNE?"—Page 10.

HOME NOOK

BY
AMANDA M. DOUGLAS

FRONTISPIECE BY JOHN GOSS



BOSTON
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1873,
By LEE AND SHEPARD,
In the Office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.

COPYRIGHT, 1901, BY AMANDA M. DOUGLAS.

HOME NOOK.

TO

SOPHIA L. SHAW.

The gate called Beautiful may be the human heart,
Where pilgrims knock and ask the alms of love,
Clasp hands in faith a while and then depart,
But still remembering wheresoe'er they rove,
A word, perchance, a smile all rich in faith,
May in some costlier stead an offering be;
And lacking royal favors to bequeath,
Such as I have I gladly give to thee.

A. M. D

BELVIDERE, N. J.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A CLOUD IN THE SKY.	7
II. TOGETHER IN COUNCIL.	20
III. A CROSS FOR ALL.	31
IV. CHANGES.	43
V. A NEW HOUSE.	56
VI. ROMANCE AND EXPERIENCE.	69
VII. SHIFTING SANDS.	81
VIII. LOOKING AT THE FUTURE.	95
IX. ELEANOR.	106
X. DRIFTING WITH THE TIDE.	118
XI. AMONG THORNS.	132
XII. IN THE SHADOW.	146
XIII. PHILIP.	161
XIV. THE WORLD AGAIN.	174
XV. A MISSING LINK.	184
XVI. A NEW FRIEND.	198
XVII. THORNS AND ROSES.	211
XVIII. A VEXED QUESTION.	225
XIX. TOUCHING THE GOLDEN SHORE.	239
XX. THROUGH PLEASANT WAYS.	255

XXI.	DAYS SUNNY AND SHADY.	263
XXII.	WORK IN EARNEST.	280
XXIII.	FLOATING OUT.	292
XXIV.	BETWEEN TWO.	304
XXV.	CLEMENT.	316
XXVI.	LILIES AND RUE.	328
XXVII.	CROWNED WITH THORNS.	331
XXVIII.	CONCLUSION.	343

HOME NOOK;

OR,

THE CROWN OF DUTY.

CHAPTER I.

A CLOUD IN THE SKY.

THE short winter day was drawing to a close. Madge Ashburton could read no longer, and this was her dream-time; so shutting her book, she tossed it over on the study-table. It just grazed the edge, and fell into Eleanor's willow work-basket.

"O Madge!" This was said reprovingly by her elder sister.

"My dear Madge!" This was uttered in the sweetest of tones by mamma, though it meant quite as much as Eleanor's more forcible check.

"I'm always doing something! Now and then I wish I was like other people — well, not much, either. I can't tell how it is, but I have a kind of affection for myself whenever I go wrong; so I often say to Madge Ashburton, 'With all thy faults, I love thee still.' Mamma, do you think me very naughty?"

Mrs. Ashburton smiled. She was a small, pale, sweet-looking woman, bearing marks of great delicacy. There was an expression on the face and in the eyes that spoke of a restful soul.

"Eleanor and Jessie are very nice," the girl went on "but if it wasn't for me, you would all fall asleep. Surplus energy is one of the results or accidents — which is it, Eleanor? — of the nineteenth century. Doesn't that sound sententious, and almost like Carlyle? Mamma, I'm not sure but there has been a mistake. I've crept into your family unaware, and though I'm no angel, you have all entertained me in the tenderest possible fashion. I *am* restless and uneasy, and when I think of growing up with nothing to do —"

"My dear," said her mother, "there is work for every one in this world."

"But a little housekeeping and visiting, and thinking about one's dresses —"

"If you paid more attention to yours, Madge, it would not be amiss," exclaimed Eleanor, rather warmly. "Reading Carlyle, and all that, is not specially beneficial to you or any other very young girl."

"But it seems to me that most lives are quite stupid."

"O!" said Jessie, in amaze.

"You are so good and thoughtful, Jessie! I don't believe that I could bother over children's dresses and poor women's babies, and I fancy that I should like to have some *real* work to do when I am grown. Mamma, do you not believe that there are women just fitted for some particular employment? Men don't all rush hap-hazard into the same thing. Clement now has gone off to China to make a fortune, and every one compliments papa upon having such a business-like son. His genius is purely commercial. Then Philip is quite crazy about medicine and surgery. Eleanor ought to marry a rich man, and be a great lady. Jessie would make a missionary, or else one of those sweet old maids whom every one adores. But I am troubled to know what my destiny will be."

"You need not be for the next two or three years," said her mother. "A good education is the first important step."

"I wonder why papa does not come!" and Madge was off to the window.

"It is past his time," remarked Jessie. "He must have missed the train."

Madge peered out in silence for many moments, thinking very rapidly, and yet she could not have separated one distinct idea from the confused mass. What she saw was a broad, sloping lawn, with an edge of leafless trees fronting the street like sentinels, groups of shadowy evergreens here and there, and the winding carriage-road, the hard path looking whiter than the surrounding ground. Not a footstep, not a rumble of wheels, however distant—not even the wind moaning up and down. Out beyond there were millions of human beings; and were any of them living a still, cold life, like this night? What were they all doing, thinking, and suffering? Ah, there came a bright star. Did it point any of them to the God up above?

She turned suddenly. The grate-fire was sending a cheerful glow through the room. It was such a pretty, home-like place! The bright carpet and partly-worn furniture, without being at all shabby, had reached that peculiarly comfortable and tempting stage. A lounge with a pillow in the corner, easy-chairs, a wire stand in the bay-window, containing some geraniums and roses in bloom; choice pictures, reflecting the ruddy fire-light, and here and there a gracefully carved bracket in black walnut, supporting a vase or tiny statue. Every one admitted that the sitting-room at Home Nook was the cosiest place in the world. The spacious parlor down stairs—or drawing-room, in Eleanor's aristocratic parlance—was nothing in comparison.

There was fair Jessie peering into the changeful blaze, thinking, doubtless, of those shivering souls huddled together on this cold night over a handful of fire. Eleanor sat in an arm-chair, grave and regal, like the queen she

was. Tall, slender, but with a firm, round figure, that gave an expression of decision to what might otherwise have been languid grace. A smooth, white forehead, with the hair banded plainly above; large, dark eyes, and a rather firm mouth, though the lips were a brilliant scarlet. She was a handsome girl, but the grand truths that set a seal upon some faces had not become her inheritance as yet. Meekness, tenderness, and long-suffering were not inborn, and would come to her only in some great strait of life after a severe battle. Seeing her there so calm and stately, something like this passed through Madge's mind. In her crude way, she had begun to speculate.

But feeling and thought were evanescent with her. Another mood swept over her, and the next instant she knelt before the fire, and laid her head in her mother's lap.

"Mamma," she exclaimed, "how very happy we are! We seem to have everything that we want; so you must not think that I was discontented a while ago."

"No, my dear, but I would like to have you remember from whom all these good gifts come."

"Yes; when anything particularly nice happens, I always feel like giving thanks. But, mamma —"

"Well?" for the pause was a long one.

"I wonder if any one ever *was* thankful for trouble and misfortune?"

"Not at first, I suppose. After a while we begin to see where we might have strayed into sin or temptation but for this very trial laid upon us. Or we are taught some needful lesson — brought nearer to God, and led to realize that our lives were given for a higher purpose than mere selfish aims and pleasures."

"It is easy to talk about by this lovely fire, but could *we* bear it patiently? I wonder if every one doesn't theorize a good deal, and —"

"You do," said Eleanor, with a short laugh. "And Hannah must be dreaming and have forgotten the lights;" so she rose and rang the bell.

"O," exclaimed Madge, disappointedly. "Sitting in the dark is so nice! It always makes me feel like talking to mamma."

A grave, middle-aged woman answered the summons. She lighted the lamp, and placed it upon the table in the centre of the room.

"Mr. Ashburton is late," she said, slowly. "The dinner has been done some time."

Mrs. Ashburton glanced at the French clock on the mantel. Eleanor caught the anxious look.

"They are very busy at the store, you know, and papa has staid late several evenings."

"Yes," thoughtfully.

Madge raised her brown eyes to her mother's face. Something flashed across her brain and rose in her throat at the same time—a quick, nervous apprehension. She possessed one of those natures in which impressions are electrical. Eleanor always called them whims. The elder sister understood that an undue indulgence would prove dangerous to such a temperament.

"What is the matter?" asked Jessie. "You look as if there was a ghost in the room."

"Like poor Mrs. Gradgrind;" and she gave a short laugh. "I can't say that I have the ghost—I was only thinking."

"Mamma," began Eleanor, rather sharply, "it seems to me that Madge is falling into bad habits. She is full of fancies and caprices, and has no stability of purpose. She reads too much."

"Well, I will not look at another book to-night. I'll put my head here in mamma's lap and let her sermonize me."

Mrs. Ashburton's slender fingers threaded her darling's sunny hair. Somehow, on this night, little Madge, with all her faults and short-comings, seemed very dear. She watched the bright glow stealing back to the cheek, and

breathed a prayer for the child's future, that appeared much less assured than either of her sisters.'

Madge thought, "What if something should happen to papa!" Nothing ever had, of course. He had come and gone daily, been spared accidents and misfortunes; and then she wondered how God could watch over every step when there were so many things in this busy world.

Her meditations were brought to a close by a sharp ring of the door-bell. She raised her head and pushed aside the bright curls.

"One of the clerks, Mr. Barnet. He wants to see Mrs. Ashburton," Hannah announced.

"Let me go, mamma;" and Eleanor rose. If it were bad news, she was strongest to receive the first shock. Mrs. Ashburton acquiesced, seized with a sudden presentiment.

Mr. Barnet rose and bowed at Eleanor's entrance. He looked nervous and flurried, and stammered out a few sentences.

"Papa?" she questioned, decisively.

"He has been taken ill, Miss Ashburton; and if you and your mother could come down—for the doctor thinks that he had better not be removed."

"He is not dead?" Eleanor asked, through white lips.

"No; he was taken a few hours ago—paralysis, I believe. Mr. Stanhope begged me to come for you."

Eleanor passed her hand across her eyes. She felt stunned, and could not comprehend the fact.

"If you prefer, I will accompany you," Mr. Barnet said, in a low tone. "The train goes down in about twenty minutes."

"Yes, we shall be obliged to you," she answered, mechanically, turning towards the door as if but half awake.

When she reached the sitting-room, she found that Madge had infected her mother with the wildest fears

and though her own heart sank within her, she rallied at her strength.

"Hush," she said to the eager questions of the girls. "Papa has been taken ill; and we must go to the city immediately. Jessie, get mamma's cloak and bonnet; and, Madge, go order the carriage."

Her prompt manner brought them to their senses. In a few moments the travellers were ready for starting. The girls kissed their mother with frantic tenderness. Eleanor tried to keep her voice steady as she said, —

"You will hear in the morning, or perhaps we shall return."

Madge and Jessie made a vain attempt to eat their dinners, but they could only speculate upon what had happened to papa. They went back to the sitting-room; but, though the fire was bright as before, the charm had gone out of all. Madge remembered what she had been saying an hour ago — no, *she* could not feel thankful for misfortune and trouble. Perhaps Jessie might — Jessie, who always turned to some side of the picture that others failed to see.

Although twin sisters, Jessie was the taller and more womanly. Indeed, they were very little alike, except the family resemblance that one always remarks. Jessie was quiet and thoughtful, with brown hair, and shady violet eyes that looked like hidden lakes gleaming from some woody nook. Madge was neither fair nor dark: chestnut hair that still kept its tint of gold; eyes that were sunshine in themselves — a sort of hazel; and a peculiar creamy complexion, with a peachy tint in the cheeks. She had been petted and indulged on every side, and was warm, impulsive, affectionate, and often unreasonable.

The household at Home Nook was a happy one indeed. Though not rich, Mr. Ashburton had been a fairly prosperous man. Misfortunes had hitherto held aloof, and the only sorrow they knew by actual experience had been the

parting with Clement, the eldest son, who, three months before, had gone to China.

Mrs. Ashburton and Eleanor continued their journey in silence. Once the daughter roused herself to make a few inquiries. Her father had been taken to Mr. Weir's, and she recognized the name of the head clerk. Dr. Conway was in attendance.

In about an hour they had reached Mr. Weir's — an unpretentious house, too near the business part of the city to be considered at all stylish, but very comfortable within, as they soon found. Mrs. Weir received them with tender yet unobtrusive sympathy.

"The doctor thinks there is a little improvement," she said; "but one can hardly tell so soon. You look chilled through. Take off your wraps, and have a good warm cup of tea."

"Has he been — is he fatally ill?" gasped Mrs. Ashburton.

"There is a hope of his being brought round, I believe. It's a sad thing to happen at such a time, but one cannot help losses and crosses. I sometimes tell Mr. Weir that those who have nothing are the happiest."

Mrs. Ashburton listened blankly, as if the latter part of the speech was of no importance to her, but Eleanor's mind took it in with a sharp pang.

Presently they were ushered into the invalid's room. He lay helpless and speechless, unconscious of all outward objects, even the voices of wife and daughter. Except for the heavy breathing, they might have thought him already dead.

Mrs. Ashburton's composure gave way at once. She threw herself beside her husband with a cry of anguish, for her heart seemed breaking.

Eleanor tried to comfort, but soon found it wiser to lead her away from the scene. Under Mrs. Weir's gentle ministrations she grew calmer after a while, and, seeing

this, the young girl returned to her father. Mr. Weir sat there, grave and silent. He would have motioned her away, but she came close beside him.

"Mr. Weir," she began, in a slow tone, that sounded cold and hollow even to herself, "was there some trouble connected with papa's sudden illness?"

The man cast his eyes down upon the carpet, and was silent. A slow, stubborn kind of man by nature, yet he had a misgiving that Miss Ashburton would be hard to evade. But did they really know or suspect nothing?

"It has been a hard winter, and almost every one has met with losses, papa among the rest, and he has had to be — careful. But I should like to know the truth."

Eleanor was quite surprised at the energy with which she made this direct and steady speech, and searched the face opposite with questioning eyes.

"I don't know, myself, Miss Ashburton," he answered, with a grim satisfaction, as if there was something she could not wrest from him.

"But you are aware of some — complications?"

She did not know what other word to use, and stumbled upon this.

"Several recent failures have crippled us pretty badly; but Mr. Ashburton hoped to get through, and so did Mr. Stanhope."

"And now?"

Eleanor's voice and face were indicative of something besides firmness — a resolve to learn all, however disheartening it might prove.

"I don't exactly know —"

"Mr. Weir, tell me what you *think*!"

She glanced steadily into his face with her clear eyes.

They'll have to know it some time, he mused. After all, why should any one be so tender to these people, who had never denied themselves a single want or wish? Right, and truth, and honor were as much for them as for

the poor man, whom the law punished so rigorously if he stepped aside. There was a good deal of sentiment about these matters, when the person in question was kind and gentlemanly as Mr. Ashburton had always been. Yet it was cowardly to strike a fallen man such a blow.

"Mr. Weir, I think I have a right to the truth, and I am able to bear it. It may be a long while before papa is sufficiently well to attend to business —"

If her voice faltered, her face was resolute.

"Women — girls, I mean — can't understand these matters, Miss Ashburton," he returned, evasively.

"I could understand if papa had been unfortunate, and I think it is that."

He could resist no longer.

"It's pretty bad. I'm sorry to say it, but—I don't believe they will get through."

He brought the words out with a jerk. He was a plain man, and when any one insisted upon the truth, he gave it.

Eleanor's breath came rapidly, and her face turned very pale.

"And this was what proved such a shock to papa," she said, chokingly.

He felt very sorry for the young and beautiful girl, though, as a general thing, he considered beauty only as a lure to vanity and extravagance.

"Miss Ashburton, there's something about it all that I don't understand myself. A month ago I would have said we were strong enough for anything, and even in spite of the losses, I don't see how — some bad news came this morning," he added, abruptly.

"And Mr. Stanhope?"

"They talked and went over the books until about two, when this happened."

"And you fear the worst?"

A peculiar expression crossed his face, in which was

mingled unmistakable sorrow. Eleanor stood straight and rigid, for the secret she had wrested from him surprised herself as well. Three hours ago she could not have dreamed such an event possible.

"And must there be — a failure?"

"I fear so, miss."

"Poor papa!" Her lip quivered with emotion.

"You had better go into the other room," he said, gently. "I will watch him, and let you know if there is any change."

Eleanor did as she was bidden, for she had no strength to resist.

As she opened the door, Mrs. Ashburton roused from her recumbent position, and glanced at her with eagerly questioning eyes.

"He is just the same, mamma," she said, softly, crossing the room and clasping the slender hand in her own with a sense of protecting power.

Then she began to think. All these years had been spent in the midst of abundance and perfect health; at least, no one had ever been dangerously ill. And now to have death and poverty confront them in this stern fashion!

Eleanor was proud and sensitive, and she shrank instinctively from the prospect. She possessed a refined and delicate nature — was one of those persons, indeed, to whom petty self-denial and the practice of economy are in the last degree distasteful. Not that she was foolishly extravagant — her friends considered her rather severe in the matter of dress; but if gay colors were not to her taste, her laces, gloves, and handkerchiefs were faultless. She was accustomed to the most scrupulous care, and her dressing-room at home was a marvel with its dainty appointments.

Her books and pictures were chosen with the same fastidiousness, and her flowers were the rarest that could,

be found. True, there had been no particular need for sacrifice, and she was not one to take the hard and unpleasant in life when the sunny path was at hand. I do not mean that she was selfish in the broad sense of the word, but she always did take into consideration her own ease and comfort. Her ideals had been moulded from the classics, and she was, perhaps, capable of making any great and heroic effort; but poverty and the petty trials staring her in the face were bitter and humiliating. With the loss of wealth must go their lovely house, position, and many social enjoyments. When she dropped out of the ranks, friends would regret for a brief while, and then solace themselves with new faces. Already in her short experience she had seen this happen to others. She remembered with something akin to shame that she had never sought out these unfortunates, and endeavored to soften the blow by friendly sympathy. Could she blame others for doing the same by her?

In March she would be twenty. If that worst of all, death, came, she must in some degree be a dependence for the rest. Then her range of love and grief grew a little wider. There was mamma to suffer by the loss. She clasped her hands in a spasm of anguish, and Mrs. Ashburton roused herself.

"My dear, what is it?" she asked, in tremulous tones.

"Nothing, mamma, save my troubled thoughts."

"Nelly,"—and the mother's face was full of tender entreaty,— "let us pray that he may be spared. I could bear any trial but that. If God will only restore him to health! I feel so weak and helpless! If I could be of any service —"

"No, mamma; lie still. Nothing can be done save that hardest of all — waiting patiently."

The words rose to her lips of their own accord. A kind of desperate courage to endure to the uttermost came in the place of trust.

Mrs. Weir went in and out quietly, or took a snatch of

sleep in her chair. Occasionally Eleanor stole away for a glimpse of the still, death-like face, or comforted her mother in soothing tones. At last, morning dawned, and they came back to common life in Mrs. Weir's rather worn sitting-room, so different from the cheerful brightness of Home Nook.

Dr. Conway pronounced his patient improved, though it was apparent to none save a medical eye. Mrs. Ashburton held a long consultation with him, and it was deemed best to remove Mr. Ashburton as soon as it would be safe.

"His recovery will be tedious, for he no longer has youth on his side. Still, I think it is possible, if he can be kept free from all care and perplexity. This is his first serious illness."

This fiat of the doctor's seemed positively good news to Mrs. Ashburton, and her heart rose in gratitude to God. The trial that lay behind it all she could not see.

Her own health had been delicate for many years, and her feeling even now was that she could better be spared than her husband. But God knew best, and she tried to keep near him in this time of trouble.

CHAPTER II.

TOGETHER IN COUNCIL.

NEARLY three weeks had elapsed since the day of Mr. Ashburton's illness. As soon as it was practicable, he had been removed to Home Nook, but his improvement was very slow indeed. They nursed him in a quiet, devoted manner, and forbore to mention any exciting topics in his presence. He had recognized them all, and, though very weak, had regained the use of his limbs; so they were quite hopeful.

Mr. Weir had been up on business, bearing kind messages from Mr. Stanhope. The prospect was not very encouraging. When it was found that the regular assets would not be sufficient to satisfy the creditors, Mr. Stanhope relinquished his property at once. A house quite heavily mortgaged, but handsomely furnished, was all that he had to offer. There was some property belonging to his daughter, that had been left by her mother, and this, of course, was not his, but he mentioned it in a manly fashion.

Mr. Stanhope was a widower with one child, a daughter, who was at a boarding school; so the change in household matters would not prove as important to them as to the Ashburtons. He seemed to take his reverse of fortune bravely, and was most anxious to satisfy all those with whom he had any dealings.

His course tended naturally to throw the blame upon Mr. Ashburton, who had been living much more expensively, it was supposed. A word of suspicion at such a time does incalculable injury. Mr. Ashburton was one of

those gentlemanly, easy-going persons, extremely generous kind to inferiors, and universally esteemed, except that he had not been considered very sharp in a business way.

With his advantages, many thought that he ought to have amassed a handsome fortune. He possessed a **fine** sense of honor, that would not have allowed him to overreach in bargain-making. Yet there had grown up a strange misgiving of doubt and dissatisfaction concerning him. No one could tell just how it started, but anxious creditors considered merely their own interests, and when it was hinted that he had been living far beyond his means, they were not disposed to be particularly lenient. It is such an easy thing to see the faults of those who are in adversity.

At Home Nook they hardly realized the extent of their misfortunes. Jessie and Madge had been in despair at first, for an illness like their father's had but one meaning and end for them — death. Mrs. Ashburton scarcely left her husband's side, and thought no evil could be compared to his possible loss. So Eleanor brooded over the coming change in silence.

The weather proved stormy and inclement. Philip was only partially informed of the state of affairs. Eleanor had no heart to disclose the worst, and since he could do no actual good by coming, she did not consider it worth while to interrupt his studies.

However, he was not long in hearing a confused newspaper statement, that fell upon him with a crushing weight. "It surely cannot be true," he said to himself, and immediately asked for leave of absence.

Turning his glance back upon the college buildings, his brain was filled with busy thoughts and hopes. Eighteen months before he had entered Yale with an earnest ambition to distinguish himself. He had marked out a career that suited every faculty of his soul. After his classical studies would come medicine, then a few years abroad,

and a life of interest to himself and usefulness to his fellow-creatures. How many times he had dreamed this over! The pleasant home that he was to make, the pride that his parents would take in his career, and the tender regard of his sisters! Home Nook would always be the central point of their love, no matter how far they might stray. Whatever toil, or labor, or success crowned their lives, would be enhanced by the benediction of this dear place, where they might meet year after year. But what if these dreams were never realized?

That day another incident had occurred at Home Nook. About noon a sleigh drove up the avenue, crunching over the icy road.

Madge ran to the window. Some one enveloped in velvet and furs, and a snowy plume nodding from the French bonnet.

"Aunt Waltham!" she exclaimed, in surprise.

A slight expression of dissatisfaction crossed Jessie's face; then she checked it immediately. It *was* kind in her to come, for she could not tell that they would rather be alone.

Eleanor rose in her usual self-possessed fashion, and stepping into the hall, requested the servant to send their visitor up stairs. There she stood awaiting her.

"My dear, dear Eleanor!" and the young woman found herself clasped in a warm embrace. "My poor, sorrowing child!"

Since Mr. Ashburton's illness, they had seen but few visitors. Many of their neighbors had kindly offered any assistance, but delicately withheld officious intrusion.

Eleanor was unnerved for an instant by the deep emotion expressed in the tone; then recovering herself, she ushered Aunt Waltham into the room.

The lady greeted Madge and Jessie with tender cordiality, and at Eleanor's solicitation, began to remove her wrappings.

"How is your father?" she asked, presently. "I confess I was so shocked at the tidings that I could hardly believe them true."

"Papa is improving. He has recognized us all," Madge answered, hopefully.

"Was it really paralysis, and superinduced by losses? I thought some of you would have written."

"I suppose we waited every day for more of a certainty," Eleanor replied, gravely apologizing.

"True, my dear, you have had a great deal of care. Philip is home, of course."

"No. It was a week before we could bring papa home, though he rallied in a slight degree very soon. Since there appeared no immediate danger, mamma and I thought it better not to interrupt him."

"Is your father able to sit up?"

"Only for a short time."

"When I heard the news I felt that I must come immediately, but I reached town so late that I spent the night at Mrs. Everett's!"

Mrs. Waltham gave Eleanor a searching glance as she uttered these words. The young girl was silent, though she knew that her aunt must have heard all there was to tell.

"Is it true, my dear?" she asked, rather hesitatingly — "this story — about the business?"

"Yes, aunt Waltham. Mr. Stanhope has already given up everything, and I suppose we must do the same."

Madge resolutely winked away a tear. If it was hard to confess the fact, it was some gratification to have the listener aunt Waltham.

That lady did not like the hard manner of stating it, though, for that matter, refinement was not one of Madge's characteristics.

"But your father has certainly made *some* provision! I was talking to him a year or two ago about settling this place upon your mother."

"Mr. Stanhope did not keep his," said outspoken Madge

"There was very little of it;" and a touch of contempt tinged Mrs. Waltham's tone. "In fact, my dear Eleanor, affairs are in a very bad state, to say the least. I know your father had this place clear, and it doesn't seem quite right that he should do so much while Mr. Stanhope gets off with a little. A man ought to think of his family first. I hope there has been some arrangement made."

Madge felt her blood rising with every word. Now she said hurriedly, —

"Papa will do just what is right, and it is right to pay one's debts. Neither mamma nor any of us would feel willing to keep this house, dear as it is, if it had to be done dishonorably."

"Madge, you know nothing about business," replied her aunt, sharply.

"I hope I know enough to be honest," the child returned, with heightened color.

"We were not discussing honesty," her aunt said, dryly. "And now, my dear Eleanor, tell me all the particulars of this sad event. You know that my interest and anxiety must be great."

Eleanor gave a brief account of the first alarm and the subsequent results. Mr. Ashburton's illness had so far prevented any settlement. She did not know how they stood, but she feared that everything would be swept away.

"It is most unfortunate, for, at your papa's time of life, it is so difficult to make a new start! And how does your mamma bear it? I should think that, with her poor health, it would have crushed her at once."

"Mamma has endured bravely so far. We have not talked much about the business part, as there seemed no use in adding to her cares until we knew the worst."

Eleanor's voice faltered a little. After all, they *were* sure, and it was only playing at hope thus to delay.

"Of course not. It is like your thoughtfulness, Eleanor;" and aunt Waltham gave Madge a reproving glance, as much as to say that no heroic virtues could be expected from her. Then the lady drew near the fire, and began to toast her feet.

Presently the bell rang for lunch, and the girls hailed it as a relief, for aunt Waltham was not a great favorite with either of them. Yet the change did not extinguish the subject.

"What a misfortune that Clement should be away just at this crisis!" she began, sipping her tea with languid grace. "With his energy and assistance, you might be extricated from the difficulty. If you could send for him—but it would be all over before he could return. I am very sorry that he went."

"But if he makes a fortune!" exclaimed Madge.

"There are fortunes to be made here. I never did approve of young men starting off as soon as they could be useful. And now you need him sorely, for Philip is too young to be of much account."

They had all wished, dozens of times, for Clement's quick brain and cool judgment. In their forlorn state, his strong and tender heart would have proved an inestimable comfort.

Afterwards Eleanor went to announce their visitor to her mother, and presently aunt Waltham was received in the invalid's room. Madge and Jessie retired to the library.

"It's too bad to let the house go, but it would be mean and dishonest to cheat," Madge exclaimed with much warmth. "I should hate to have such a thing on my conscience. If *we* could only do something, Jessie!"

Madge had turned this idea over many times in her brain. She felt so energetic and courageous that she longed to go to work at once, and do her very best. If she were a man, how many paths would be opened to her!

"We shall have enough to do by and by," Jessie re-

turned, soberly. "It will not be an easy matter to make ourselves content with all the changes."

"And you know what I was talking about *that* night, Jessie — feeling thankful for trouble. Now that it has come, I am afraid I don't like it — very much."

Jessie smiled at the perplexed little face, and yet her own eyes filled slowly with tears.

When aunt Waltham returned to the sitting-room, she found Eleanor alone, much to her delight.

"My poor child," she exclaimed, in the tenderest of tones, "this is indeed a cruel blow, and it will fall the heaviest upon you. Your mamma has not the forethought to realize how much it will affect you all —"

"But I have not told her," interrupted the daughter. "I thought she required her strength for nursing papa."

"Well, it is the town talk, and is not considered much of a secret, though it is like your generous heart to bear the burden alone. Your mamma is so fond of seclusion that it will make little difference to her, but it ruins your prospects completely. I confess I can't see what you are all to do. Your father never was the one to look ahead. The Ashburtons are just that sort of come-day, go-day people; but I have learned a little by experience. If this place *had* been settled upon your mother!"

Eleanor knew in her heart that her mother would not have kept it a day, but her nature was not as courageous as that of Madge; so she simply said, —

"What do you think of papa?"

"I was surprised to see so great an improvement. His mind seems rather weak and confused, but he inherits a good constitution from both sides of the family. I haven't any doubt but that he will recover."

"I am so glad!" and a sudden hope thrilled through Eleanor's heart.

"Though I cannot imagine how it will be possible for him to make a new start in these dull times. The stagnation in business is fearful."

Eleanor wondered within herself when he would be able to think of business again.

"You will feel it so much more keenly than Madge or Jessie," aunt Waltham went on, with winning softness. I always said you were much like myself, and such a blow would kill me. With your refinement and sensitiveness, you will be miserable in any coarse, common sphere."

Mrs. Waltham was one of those persons who believed that poverty must necessarily be coarse and vulgar.

Eleanor winced a little. There was much in the impending change that filled her with dismay.

"To an educated and refined person, certain surroundings are absolutely necessary. It seems to be a law of nature. Now, Jessie could take to kitchen-work, and I dare say Madge, when a little older, could teach school without the slightest feeling on the subject; but you could not, my dear Eleanor. The least word or slight would sink deeply into your soul."

Eleanor Ashburton felt that this was true. Was she to blame for her nature?

"And this is why I sympathize so keenly with you. In your own set you could marry well, but in the grade below, you will find few men of attractive mind or manner. You cannot mix with the vulgar mass, and will always seem isolated. Dear child, I wish that you belonged to me."

Eleanor's eyes filled with tears. Something in the pitying voice soothed while it stirred up rebellion.

Mrs. Waltham was emphatically a woman of the world. Not wanting in certain kindly and generous elements, which many people esteem as the higher virtues, she was gracefully charitable to delicate poverty, and performed many meritorious acts of kindness; but to pinching want, accompanied with rags, gaunt faces, and obscurity, she turned a deaf ear. It was part of her creed that no one need be ignorant, dirty, or ragged. There were public schools on the one hand, and charitable institutions for the

sick and destitute. Those who would not improve these means of comfort deserved to suffer. She could discourse eloquently upon these topics, and she was considered in her circle a very superior woman.

For herself she wanted all the elegances of life. Any sacrifice of her own comfort and ease would not have been endurable. She had no sympathy with the high heroism of earnest souls who worked their way upward over thorny paths. To strengthen Eleanor for the life and duties that lay before her was like folly to Mrs. Waltham. On the contrary, she was already speculating whether it would not still be possible to make Eleanor's handsome face redeem her misfortunes. Poor girls did sometimes marry well.

But she was wise enough to give no hint of this. The other girls, being so much younger, were not as settled in their tastes and habits, and could readily adapt themselves to the new life that was inevitable.

Eleanor listened to the plausible arguments and tender but specious sympathies, until, in an incomprehensible way, she seemed absolutely wronged by the late events. And if some exertion on her part would be necessary, what could she do? Teach music, with her fine ear, to which the slightest discord was torture? or take a situation in a school, which would be equally distasteful?

The sun was sinking slowly, sending level yellow rays through the half-closed blinds, when there was another stir through the quiet house. Madge had seen Philip coming up the walk, and ran eagerly to the hall door.

"Madge! My poor darlings!" and he clasped both sisters to his heart. "Why was I not sent for? And dear papa —"

"He is better, Philip, and Nelly thought —"

"But as Clement is away, I surely come next. And I never dreamed of anything so bad as this business. I have been in the city since ten this morning. Do you know —"

Madge and Jessie were both sobbing in Philip's arms. The brave fellow swallowed a lump in his throat and tried to steady his voice for a word. But at eighteen it was a hard blow, and to him there was a keener sting than the loss.

"But we will be honest, Philip. If the house must go, we will not cheat or do anything wrong."

That was Madge's entreaty.

"Heaven forbid!" he exclaimed, fervently. I hope no one thought of that, and if so, it is too late. I want the debts paid, if we do not have a dollar left."

Eleanor came flying down the stairs, glad to hear the strong, inspiring voice. And between them all they led him into the library, where they talked and cried together

"Aunt Waltham is here," Eleanor said, at length.

"I am glad to have her remember us in our adversity," Philip replied, cheerfully. "But it is too bad that you should have borne this alone."

"There has not been much so far, only the sickness. Dr. Conway said that papa must not be agitated, and mamma thought it best not to disturb you until we knew the facts. Indeed, she does not imagine the full extent of our misfortune. I have not had the heart to tell her."

"You have seen the papers?"

"Yes," and Eleanor's fair face flushed.

"Papa's honesty has been called in question. My one prayer is, that there may be enough to cover the debts. I want no one to suffer through us."

"We will give up everything," Jessie said, with quiet firmness.

"Yes, my darling. Now, I must go and see mamma, and then for a talk by the fireside. I almost wish aunt Waltham was not here. Nelly, what a dear, brave girl you have been!"

Eleanor colored with vivid consciousness. She had borne each day's trials with a kind of defiant strength but

somehow she felt that it was not true courage. Neither was she at all resigned. The tender grace that brings reliance upon God and trust in him was yet to come. She was trying the dreary waste of waters in her own strength. Well for her if she was not forced to say, some day, "**All thy waves and storms are gone over me.**"

CHAPTER III.

A CROSS FOR ALL.

THE shutters were closed, the curtains drawn, and the little group around the fireside had no thought for the mid-winter night without, but looked at Philip with expectant faces. Even aunt Waltham appeared deeply interested.

"And you had a long talk with this person, Philip. You said his name was Weir—did you not?"

Mrs. Waltham usually designated those in inferior stations as persons—beings rendered necessary by circumstances.

"Yes, I was there nearly all day."

"Are you sure nothing can be saved?"

"Papa has no right to anything when there is barely enough to pay his debts," Philip replied, almost bluntly.

Madge gave his hand a tender little squeeze.

"I think it very hard to work all one's life and not have anything, and then to be laid upon a sick-bed! These events occur so frequently in financial circles, that one ought to make some provision in prosperity."

"I don't know how papa could unless he had put his property out of his hands; and I am very thankful now, for if his good name is called in question, we shall be able to answer truly that we have not kept back a farthing."

"Want of success is as bad as a crime in this world," Mrs. Waltham said, dryly.

"But success is not always within one's reach. It is very strange, though, for Mr. Weir said the house was in an excellent condition in the fall. He thinks—"

Philip checked himself, for Mr. Weir's suspicion had

been hardly expressed, and he had no right to repeat it at present.

"I spent last night at the Everetts', and they were discussing it. Mr. Everett thought it very singular that so good a house should go down so suddenly, unless affairs had been very loosely conducted. And it's odd that Mr. Stanhope should have so little."

"The more need of our giving up everything."

"To pay *his* debts," was the rather angry rejoinder.

"No, aunt Waltham; papa is responsible only for half, since it can be proved by the books that they have shared alike."

"I dare say that he has made a better use of it," was the reply, with considerable asperity.

Mrs. Waltham was vexed with the scrupulousness that Philip displayed. While she would not have counselled any open fraud, if by sharp management even a small sum could have been saved, she would have approved of it.

"Papa's illness is the most unfortunate part. Mr. Weir thinks that if he could explain a few matters, it would render the settlement much easier."

"Why doesn't he go to Mr. Stanhope?"

"I believe Mr. Stanhope has given all the facts within his province."

"Your father has been too easy and credulous, Philip. He might just as well have been independent by this time; and here he is, helpless himself, with a family —"

"But we all have youth and health, and can work, interrupted Philip. "I, for one, will forego my hopes and take up my burden. I am sorry for the girls and mamma —"

"I am not sure that it will be so very bad," said Madge, reflectively. "Think how nicely Miss Foster and her mother live on what she earns by teaching school. They always look so cosy and pretty, and Miss Foster makes such lovely cone frames and baskets, and has such a beau

tiful collection of skeleton leaves. And she actually cushioned a chair that looks just as if it had been done by an upholsterer."

"When you are forty, Madge, you may possibly emulate this object of your admiration, if cone frames and albums of dried leaves have not gone out of fashion," was the rather contemptuous rejoinder.

"We shall find something to do, little Madge," Philip said, twining his arm around her neck.

There was a silence of many minutes. Each one was busy thinking. Sad enough were they all at heart.

"What do you propose to do first?" aunt Waltham asked presently.

"I should like to have the business settled as soon as possible. Of course we must leave Home Nook."

It fell like a stern sentence upon them all. They had known it before, but they had hitherto appended an "if" to their misfortunes, with that resolute clinging to hope which seems a constituent element in human nature.

"And you?" Eleanor said, hesitatingly, glancing at her brother.

"I shall look for a situation in some business where I can get the highest salary. You see I am growing mercenary already;" and he gave a faint smile.

"I think it would be wisdom to send for Clement."

"I do not agree with you there, aunt Waltham. If he should be prospered, he may be able to do in a few years what it would take him a lifetime to accomplish here. Some day he may be rich enough to buy back Home Nook."

"O!" exclaimed Madge, "we ought all to set ourselves about that. There will never be so precious a place in the wide world. Like the old knight's quest for the San Greal, Philip."

"Without a Sir Galahad," he returned, sadly.

"No, you are to be that."

"Do stop your nonsense, Madge!" said aunt Waltham, who did not feel in a very serene mood. "Philip will have other things to occupy his attention. I wonder that you can be so childish at such a time."

The quick tears sprang to her eyes. How many delightful evenings they had enjoyed with mamma, who never checked their fancies, and always took an interest in their little schemes! Madge wished she could talk to her now. Although there was a nurse in Mr. Ashburton's room, his wife rarely left it.

Philip tried not to rouse aunt Waltham in the discussion about business that followed, but she was quite inclined to cavil at his suggestions. It was a relief to all when she proposed to retire.

"I will go and take one more look at poor brother," she said, motioning to Eleanor, who left the room also.

"I'm glad she has gone," exclaimed Madge, with much satisfaction. "She always throws a grim shadow over everything. I never could understand Nelly's liking for her."

"But she is very sweet to Nelly."

"On account of her beauty and style, I suppose;" and Madge laughed. "Somehow, Philip, I don't feel utterly cast down, hard as it is."

"I am very glad, my darling. And you, Jessie?"

Jessie's lip quivered, and a soft flush stole to her brow.

"If papa was well, and mamma didn't mind, we could bear it quite comfortably, I think. But is it true, Philip, that something has been said about papa?"

"There are enough standing ready to cast a stone. When I think how kind and generous papa has always been, and how he has helped others out of trouble, it almost makes me angry."

"They don't say that papa has not been honest?"

Madge's face was aflame with indignation, and her voice faltered.

"Not exactly that, but they insinuate that he has been living beyond his means, and since he has this handsome property, and Mr. Stanhope hardly anything, there is something wrong about it. I can't get it out of my mind but that there has been unfair dealing, only I am sure papa is innocent. I would not say this before aunt Waltham."

Madge rose and stood in the firelight, the impersonation of scorn, her eyes brilliant, her cheeks glowing in scarlet.

"Papa guilty of anything dishonorable!" she cried. "It is a cruel and wicked falsehood! I could almost be glad that he is sick, and can hear nothing of it!"

"It is bitter and unjust, when he has always been so good," exclaimed Jessie, her faith receiving a shock.

"Mr. Stanhope wants the business hurried through, as he has received some kind of an offer to go to Europe. Mr. Weir is coming up again to-morrow. We shall all have to make sacrifices;" and Philip sighed wearily.

"And it falls hard enough upon you, Phil," Madge said, earnestly, kissing the thoughtful brow.

"There is a long life before me, in all probability, and I may be able to regain what I lose now. I expect to be a doctor, and all that, if it is a dozen years hence."

"All that' means to have Home Nook back again, I suppose," Madge said, with a bright look.

"Dear old home! You remember when we christened it? Papa was so glad to have it in perfect order and out of debt! And we had planned such long, happy years here. Yes, I shall never rest until it is ours again."

"If I could only do something!" began Madge, energetically. "Some women, when they are grown, paint pictures and write books."

"And which do you think you will achieve?" he asked, with a smile.

"Neither, I am afraid. I don't believe I have a bit of

genius," she said, sorrowfully, but with real humility. "Only I will try to do my best."

"That is all any one can ask. We must keep mamma from feeling the difference too plainly. Now, it is high time that you and Jessie were in bed."

They bade each other a tender good night, and paused for a moment in papa's room. It did make them feel stronger to have Philip home.

It was nearly midnight when Eleanor sought her apartment. All day her brain had been distracted with contending emotions. Some peculiar phase of mind led her through to the girls' room, which Madge and Jessie always shared.

They were sleeping peacefully, Jessie fair and calm, as if no troublous thoughts haunted her pillow; Madge, half smiling, the scarlet lips slightly apart, and the bright curls carelessly shading her smooth brow.

An almost bitter expression passed over Eleanor's face. What did they know of care and anxiety about the future? Aunt Waltham was right—it would be no great cross to them—partly because they were too young, but more, she believed, from the fact that their natures were radically different, and could not suffer to the extent that hers would. And she began to feel with her aunt, that something might have been done in prosperity to secure them against such an utter reversion as this. She could never be light-hearted and happy again. These events would sink deeply into her soul, and the daily wear of trials and cares bow her to the earth. All the brightness and beauty of life was over for her.

She did not think that, through all the doubt and darkness, Jessie was clinging in simple faith to the support more sure than any human strength, and that even if God had allowed this to come upon them, he would lead them through perilous paths, and bring them to the house Beautiful at last.

Childish Madge had said with a sob and a smile, "Jessie, darling, I can never be as good as you and mamma, but I keep praying that God will show me the right way."

But Eleanor uttered no prayer, neither did she bow her head to the storm. Their tranquillity came, she fancied, from an inability to comprehend the higher losses that would be hers; and while she wished for a calmer mood, she still prided herself upon her keener suffering, as if it raised her above them.

The next morning Philip had a long interview with his father. Mrs. Ashburton was not as ignorant of the business as Eleanor supposed. In his reaction from stupor, her husband had referred to the events of the day that had proved so nearly fatal to him, and she gathered that the loss would be total. Philip, therefore, took her into counsel at once.

"I cannot seem to remember," Mr. Ashburton said weakly, with an entreating glance at his son. "I meant to go over it all. I think there was some mistake."

"Mr. Weir explained it to me yesterday. The creditors are anxious for a settlement. Some of them are in urgent need, I believe."

And yet Philip thought that his father would never have so pushed an unfortunate man.

"Will it take all?"

The eyes questioned with an intense, feverish light, and there was a painful quiver in the voice.

"Father, I am young and strong, and though I cannot supply your place, I will do all in my power to ease the burden."

"The house must be given up?"

Philip bowed his head.

Mr. Ashburton glanced at his wife. Both thought of the day when they had exchanged their city home for this spot, where they had fondly hoped to pass their declining years. It was bitter, indeed, that this cup of content should be dashed from their lips.

"God help us!" he groaned.

"My dear husband, we still have each other," his wife said, clasping his wasted hand. "If God chooses to withhold some comforts and try us by adversity, shall we murmur after having had so many pleasant years?"

"You are right, Margaret," he returned, feebly. "But to lie here helpless, and see all plunged into poverty —"

"It seems to me," began Philip, cheerfully, "that one grand feature in it all is the fact of our sharing it together. It will not be as hard as you think, my dear father."

Mrs. Ashburton gave her son a look of grateful love. To see him ready and willing to take the care in this manly fashion was most satisfying to her troubled and anxious heart.

"The girls will bear it bravely, too," he said, assuringly.

"Poor Eleanor!" was Mr. Ashburton's sighing comment.

"Nelly will feel it the most, to be sure;" and then Philip remembered for a moment what he was giving up, perhaps forever — who could tell?

By degrees they came around to the business part again. It was evident that Mr. Ashburton's mind had been considerably shattered. He made several ineffectual efforts to recall the events of that fatal morning, but could seem to get no farther than the declaration that there had been a mistake.

"If I could see Stanhope," he said, feebly.

Presently Mr. Weir made his appearance. He remarked considerable amendment in Mr. Ashburton, and explained very clearly how matters stood. During the last two months there had been some heavy losses, and the business was not in as prosperous a condition as they had all thought. Mr. Stanhope was away, but Mr. Weir had received instructions to act for him. Some of the creditors were urgent, and it was considered best to proceed to a settlement as soon as possible.

Mrs. Waltham remained at Home Nook for the next fortnight. Eleanor was her constant companion. Madge and Jessie were left much to themselves, and unconsciously took up the old routine, which was quite easy for them, as they were still in school. Philip spent the greater part of his time in the city, and when at home was unusually grave. Indeed, their light-hearted enjoyment seemed past forever.

"I believe we have found a purchaser for Home Nook," he announced to the girls one evening. "A gentleman who will take all the furniture we care to leave, and who may offer us a chance to buy it back in the course of eight or ten years."

"As if we could!" said Eleanor, despondingly. "It will be worth a good deal more then."

"And Clement may come home a rich man. Poor fellow! it will be sorry news to him. Have you sent letters since papa's illness?"

"One; but mamma requested nothing should be said about the losses. Who is to buy the house?"

"The offer came through Mr. Weir's instrumentality. A Mr. Browning, a grave, queer sort of man, who has had a good deal of trouble — so we are not alone. His father, an old man, is a helpless invalid and childish, and he has a sister incurably insane — quite harmless, but requiring constant attention. His mother and his wife make up the family, as they have no children. He wants a quiet country home near the city, a place that will be pleasant for his wife. He took a great fancy to the name, I think, and is coming up to-morrow."

"And where are we to go?" asked Madge, in dismay.

"That is just what I want to talk about. Mamma says that it will make no difference to her, only she doesn't wish to be right in the city. I fancy that it would prove more convenient to me to be up town, as I expect to turn into a business man."

"What will you do, Phil?"

"I am negotiating for a situation. Business is very dull and at my age I cannot expect wonderful things. Six hundred must do for a beginning. Indeed, I shall esteem myself fortunate to get that."

"But we cannot live on six hundred!" exclaimed Eleanor, in dismay.

Madge took it up immediately. "We must have a cosy little cottage, and only one servant, as they do in story-books."

"There will be no servant on that," was Eleanor's decisive rejoinder.

"Well, Jessie ought to know how poor people manage; she goes among them so much."

"It is often hard and inconvenient," was Jessie's slow reply. "I do not believe that poor people are the happiest, or are less free from care; but one can find many pleasant things in life."

"People may romance about poverty, but I do not consider it a blessing in disguise," Eleanor said in a hard, haughty tone. "You may all feel willing to go away from this place, but no other ever *can* be home to me. It is a bitter, bitter trial!"

"It will not be easy for any of us, Nelly;" and Jessie's soft eyes filled with tears. "But since it is God's will, we must strive to bear it with patience and courage."

"One *can* resolve to endure anything, but I must confess that I do not see any pleasure in hardships and deprivation."

"Only as we find it in cheerful sacrifice," was Jessie's timid rejoinder.

"We shall all have many pangs to suffer," Philip said, in a low yet brave tone. "The actual experience is always so different from what one imagines."

Somehow it did not seem so very terrible to Madge. It was true that she had a vein of romance in her nature.

and possessed a happy, sanguine temperament, that could not long linger on the dark side. With Jessie it had become a deeper and more comprehensive matter. Already she was trying to bring her occasionally rebellious feelings to the higher standard of Him who said, "Follow me."

"We have strayed from our first subject," Philip recommenced. "If you girls will decide upon any locality, I will get a list of the houses that may be rented."

Mr. Browning came up that afternoon with his wife. Eleanor received them with stately coldness, and took them through the house. It seemed almost a profanity to her that stranger eyes should peer into their sacred little nooks, and discuss the many things so dear to them in a practical business manner. She disliked Mr. and Mrs. Browning, though she could have given no good reason.

"Papa's room," she said, pausing at a door.

"Do not disturb them, please," Mrs. Browning entreated, in a sweet tone, for she was aware of the family misfortunes.

Philip joined them in their walk through the grounds. They were charmed with the place even at this unpromising season, and on the following day negotiations were to commence.

"It will hardly be possible for us to give possession before the first of May," Philip said.

"Very well," was the rejoinder, in a kindly tone. "Do not distress yourself. It will be a severe trial, I know."

"What a fine young man!" Mrs. Browning exclaimed, as they were walking down the street. "Miss Ashburton is handsome, but very haughty. My heart never warmed to her at all. She seemed to look upon us as interlopers."

"Do not judge her too harshly. A reverse of fortune is a hard thing to bear."

"Was there not some talk of the Ashburtons living beyond their means?"

"There is enough to be said when a man is unfortunate.

The son seems very much in earnest about paying every debt, and I like that."

"They have been living in a very handsome style, I should judge. But I am charmed with the house. What a lovely place it must be in summer!"

"I am glad you like it," her husband replied, with a smile. "Some way, I am deeply interested in these people."

"If the other girls are like the eldest one, I am afraid that I am not," said his wife, quietly. "I was prepared to feel much sympathy for them."

And so Eleanor lost when she might have attracted a true and tender friend.

CHAPTER IV.

CHANGES.

THE Brownings decided to take Home Nook. The agreement was made, and all legal matters duly settled. But when Mr. Ashburton came to sign the deed, a pang seemed to wrench every fibre of his nature. Why had this misfortune fallen upon them? he asked, in feeble protest. Other men were successful and prosperous, men who had been less scrupulous in their dealings than he.

Yet there was one bright ray in the darkness. He could stand before the world a just and honest man. No one should say that he had wronged him in the slightest particular. It was a comfort to know that all liabilities would be covered.

But it was a sad night for them. The children clustered about the sitting-room hearth in silence, for they were too sorrowful to talk to each other. Eleanor had her book open, but was not reading.

There was a gentle turning of the door, and a light step beside them. Mamma, in her silvery-gray dress, with a tiny lace-frill at the throat, and the sweetest of all faces. Madge could always remember the picture she made, the fire-light giving her a faint glow, for the March nights were still chilly.

Philip sprang up, but Mrs. Ashburton took her olden place by Madge. The bright head was laid in her lap, but she could not see the tears that flowed quietly.

"My darlings," she began quite calmly, "as papa was asleep, I could not resist the impulse to join you and make it seem once more like old times. They will soon be gone. Are you all discouraged?"

"O, no, mamma, not quite that," replied Jessie. "But it's very, very hard. There never can be another place like this. It seems to me that we feel as sorrowful as Eve when she went out of Eden — only this is not any special fault in us."

"No, dear, there are some misfortunes against which we cannot guard. And since papa will have so much the worst in his shattered health, it is our duty to help bear the burden and take up the new life cheerfully. Madge, do you remember our last talk here?"

"I shall never forget it, mamma." The child's voice faltered, and she had much ado to keep back the sobs. "About being thankful for trouble; but O, when I think it all over, I cannot be!"

"We do not see the end, my dear. It looks very dark now;" and the clear voice faltered, as if it was an effort to keep from tears. "But the Lord God has promised that it shall be light at even time."

"To wait all one's long life!" and now the sentence ended with a pitiful cry.

"There are many things besides light. Don't you remember, my darling, about the songs in the night? It seems to me a type of the sweet thoughts one might have in even the darkest surroundings. And the cloud by day leading the Israelites into a new and beautiful country? Who knows whither our cloud and pillar of fire may take us?"

"But we do not want any new country. Yet you are all comfort, mamma. You see on the outside of things, and a long way off, like a glint of rainbow before the shower is done."

"We must remember that somewhere God's hand is in it, and take it not complainingly, but with meekness."

She gave a furtive glance at Eleanor as she uttered this. The handsome face was haughty and impassible. How many hours of anxious thought her mother had bestowed

upon her, Eleanor could hardly guess. As if with a strange foreknowledge, she understood that her child's nature must surge and surge against the stony shores, bruised and beaten, and accept peace at last only after the severest struggle. For with Eleanor the deeper phases of spiritual life were held as illusions that the ignorant enjoyed in their simplicity, or that, with fanatics, took the higher forms of transcendentalism. She was not in a state to be ennobled by any suffering.

"Philip and I have been discussing our new home," said Jessie. "It will be small, but you know Gerald Massey says, 'We all can bring a little love to mend the world!'"

"True, my darling, and that is all we shall have to mend our broken fortunes—love, and faith, and trust in God."

Jessie clasped her arms around her mother's neck and kissed her amid tears. A half-strangled sob came up from Madge's heart. A long, long silence ensued, for no one had the strength or courage to talk.

A bright, breezy morning, with a fresh, bracing air, followed this. Philip went to the city to see what he could find in the way of houses, and Jessie donned her cloak and hat for a tour among what Madge styled her poor folks.

There was a very general feeling of sympathy for the Ashburtons with the people at Riverside. They had always been kind and generous to the poor, and while this endeared them to one class, their graces and refinements made them equally admired by the other. Mrs. Ashburton had received many true and tender evidences of regard since their misfortunes.

Eleanor had held herself coldly aloof since the trouble began. Morbidly sensitive, she had chosen not to run the risk of being either slighted or pitied. Jessie had shrunk from the spirit of school-girlish curiosity and wonder; but

Madge, finding no change in herself, had gone on in her usual fashion.

Walking down the wide street, a strange feeling rushed over Jessie. Not exactly a sense of loneliness, and yet a certain dreary misgiving. Now that the fortune was actually gone, she thought of the many pleasures it had brought, hitherto unremarked; and most of all the opportunity of making others happy. Very little of it could come in the new sphere.

From this broad avenue she turned into a side-street. A few modest cottages were at the lower end, surrounded by small gardens. At one of these Jessie paused.

A neat, fair-looking woman opened the door—an odd little thing withal, who wore short side-curls that had once been flaxen, but were now silvery. An old-fashioned chintz dress, a small dove-colored shawl, pinned tightly about her neck, and a wide gingham apron, completed her costume.

“O, Miss Jessie!” she ejaculated. “It’s a long time since we’ve set eyes on you, child! Come right in. I’m powerful glad, and Rachel will be delighted!”

The parlor—for on this floor there were parlor, kitchen, and bedroom, and the first named, with a southerly front, lay in floods of sunshine. Across both windows was a shelf of flowers in the highest state of perfection. The furniture was quaint enough. Here a carved cedar secretary, now used for household linen; opposite an Indian chest of drawers, both of which had taken a long sea voyage before reaching their present home. An old mahogany sofa, studded with brass nails; high-backed chairs, elaborately carved and polished until they shone like glass. A few smoke-stained pictures, and two or three bright modern ones—Jessie’s addition to the household adornments. One pretty crayon, done by her hand, bearing the date of the past Christmas.

In a rocker by the window sat Mrs. Rachel. Everybody

always called her so because her sister did. Her husband had been lost at sea many a long year before; so Mrs Rachel Dormer and her sister Hetty Bright lived alone. The former had been an invalid a long while, and was quite crippled—the result of a bad fall. She was older than Hetty, and a little larger in every respect—not so quaint-looking or energetic.

Mrs. Rachel kissed Jessie tenderly. Part of it was for the misfortune.

“My dear child, I am so glad to see you!”

Hetty bustled up with a chair, and almost out of breath.

“Sit down,” she said, “and take off your things. Why, the sight of you is good for weak eyes! How is your papa and the rest?”

“Papa is improving. I have not been anywhere of late;” and Jessie came to a sudden pause. “I don’t know as it was right to neglect every one, but some how home seemed the dearest place.”

“Yes, I told Hetty that we couldn’t expect you at such a time. My dear, it has been a hard blow. If we did not know that we were in the hands of One who was all love and wisdom, it would be blind walking for us. But you have learned to trust—”

“I try to remember,” said Jessie, tremulously.

“Is it all true, Miss Jessie? Is the place really sold? Miss Perkins was in here last night, and said you were going away. And then I couldn’t help saying to Rachel, says I, ‘Now, that’s what I call hard and cruel! I don’t believe the Lord had much to do with it.’ Are you sure your father’s partner was an honest man?”

“Why, I suppose so;” and Jessie could not forbear smiling at the energetic little body.

“There are many rogues in this world, Miss Jessie—wolves in sheep’s clothing. To think that Rachel and I should put most of our little fortin’ in that speculation years ago, and be misled by our own cousin, too! Why, I’d a

trusted him with every dollar that I had in the world, only I'm glad we didn't. But we've had to pinch since. To be sure, we have our house, as Miss Perkins says; but if you eat and drink that, it's soon gone!"

The fortune was a standing grievance to Miss Hetty, a sort of gauge with which she always compared everything that happened, and drew some parallel. Nearly ten years before they had been induced to invest it in some lands said to be rich in copper ore; but the mining company failed, and the plausible cousin went to South America: so they still held title-deeds to acres and acres of unsalable land.

"We have no reason to believe that Mr. Stanhope would take the advantage of papa," Jessie replied, quite firmly.

"But you never know what people will do until they are tried. Didn't we have the utmost faith in cousin Bright?"

Hetty looked up in triumph, as if that was an unanswerable argument.

"But Miss Jessie is right. It's not fair to surmise when one has no proof. He lost as much as your papa—did he not?"

"He gave up his house," Jessie answered, in a little embarrassment. "They have had a great many losses this winter."

"And at the back of all, somebody is dishonest, or lives beyond his means. My dear, most of the trouble in this world does come from dishonesty. Now, if your papa had been paid what was owing to him, you see he could have met his debts without any sacrifice."

Miss Hetty was quite logical, and always cleared up her points as she went along.

"You are really going away?"

Mrs. Rachel asked this in the softest of tones, and her eyes expressed a fervent sympathy.

"Yes." Jessie's lip quivered. "Philip is to take a situation in New York, and it is best that we should live nearer."

"O, I can't bear to think of your leaving Riverside!" and Miss Hetty burst into tears. "We shall miss you so much! I tell Rachel that she's always better after you have been here."

"And I am always better, too. Dear Mrs. Rachel, how many times in the last few weeks I have thought of your good counsel, your patience, and —"

Something else that could not be put in words. Mrs. Rachel clasped the little hand.

"It may be a hard way for you, my child, but you know in whom to trust. Maybe, if you should live to be an old woman, you will see with clearer eyes, and perhaps understand that it was good to bear the burden in your youth. Now you must tell me about your mamma and Madge."

They had a delightful talk, broken now and then by Miss Hetty's odd sentences, which seemed to bounce down and up like an India-rubber ball. Jessie grew quite light-hearted and hopeful.

They both made her promise to come to tea before she went away from Riverside.

"Though I can't help believing that some day you'll come back to Home Nook," said Hetty, smiling amid her tears. "It seems just like a dream to me."

Jessie gave a lingering look at the house. How many pleasant hours she had enjoyed with these two women! and to part with old friends appeared harder than giving up their beautiful house.

She walked on slowly to her next place — a small tenement-house, with a family on each side of the hall, the whole building pervaded with a sort of shabby, discouraged air. Obeying the summons to enter, she was greeted by a thin, faded-looking woman, who was vainly trying to make two troublesome children neat and orderly; but what with their putting dirty hands upon clean faces, and giving their heads a swift whirl, as soon as their hair had been brushed straight, the work did not progress very rapidly.

"O, Miss Jessie!" and though the smile was almost as faded and wan as herself, there was a strand of tender grace in it. "Excuse my wet hands, and —" She finished with a kind of deprecating glance around the room.

"Don't disturb yourself," returned Jessie, cheerfully. "How are you all?"

"Is that Jessie Ashburton?" inquired a querulous voice from the adjoining bedroom. "Well, I began to think you was too proud to go out any more. But everybody's got to learn that they can't be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease!"

"O, mother!" entreated the mild and still deprecating voice. This mother-in-law had been the bane of weak Mrs. Deane's life.

"Yes — why not? Rich folks always have to come down. Don't the Bible say it'll be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? And so I thank the Lord that I'm not rich."

"But Miss Jessie's folks were always so good, mother, I don't believe *that's* the reason," — the emphasis meaning riches, — "for there's many a poor person who doesn't seem fit for heaven."

After her protest Mrs. Deane looked more faded and frightened than ever.

"If you mean me," — and Mrs. Deane senior thought that her daughter-in-law did mean her by every remark she made, — "if you mean me, I can tell you that after you've gone through with all the trials I've had, you'll think a deal more of heaven than you do now!" and the old woman's voice rose shrill and high. "Few people have gone through with as much trouble one way and another. Loss of money's nothing to it!"

"No, there are worse things," said Jessie, gently, for she knew by experience that old Mrs. Deane loved to think her case harder than that of any other human being.

"Money is a great snare, a great snare! Them that

haven't any may be thankful, though it's a hard thing to be dependent. If I was young I wouldn't mind poverty;" and a deep sigh finished the sentence.

"How is the baby?" asked Jessie, anxious to escape these tirades.

"O, he is well;" and Mrs. Deane took her to the opposite side of the room, turning down the corner of the crib-quilt. He had been washed until he shone, and though his baby-slip was calico, it was clean and pretty. But his mother had another motive besides pride in her baby.

"O, Miss Jessie!" and the tears rose to her eyes; "I'm so sorry for your misfortune! It is hard to be poor and to give up all your comforts. I've thought of it night and day. You have always been so good to me, and it's such a pleasure to see your sweet face. Are you really going away?"

"Yes; the place has been sold."

Jessie tried very hard to keep her voice steady.

"It's a shame! I don't understand why God lets such things happen to people who have always been good and kind. Your mother, I am sure, is one of the sweetest women in the world. I used to enjoy going to sew at her house before I was married; and though Tom isn't a hard man to get along with, I sometimes half wish that I'd let him alone. But my trouble is nothing to yours; only what shall I ever do without you?"

"You will find some new friends, I hope;" and Jessie's voice had a quiver in it. "Mamma sent a message to you. We are going to sell some of our most expensive furniture, but there are several old articles that we shall not want to take—some partly-worn clothes, and the like. If you could send Mr. Deane over for them, you would be quite welcome."

"O, Miss Jessie! you and yours are always thinking what you can do for others. If ever any one made good use of

money, it is your mamma. And now that you should be poor —”

“We try to think that it is all best and right, and that God has some wise purpose in it all. We must learn to do our duty in any state of life;” and Jessie gave a sweet yet sorrowful smile.

“When I hear you or your mamma talk, Miss Jessie, I believe there is some heart in religion; but she” — nodding to the bedroom — “takes it all out of me.”

The words had been uttered hardly above a breath, but Mrs. Deane started guiltily at the interruption.

“Betsey, is Jessie Ashburton’s call *all* to you? If it isn’t, I’d like to see her!”

Old Mrs. Deane always ignored the polite usages of society, as mere forms, pampering pride and vanity. Once, when her daughter-in-law had ventured to suggest that “Miss Jessie” sounded more respectful, the old lady replied, angrily, —

“If anybody’s Christian name ain’t good enough for ’em, things have come to a pretty pass! Why, in Bible times they didn’t have any other. Just look if you can find a place where any one is called *Mr.* Paul or *Miss* Dorcas! It’s nothing but worldliness and wanting to be honored. I shan’t call anybody Lord in this world!”

So meek Mrs. Deane never made another protest.

As a young girl she had always been called Bessy Lawton — a rather pretty and interesting person, who had been a great favorite with Mrs. Ashburton; and when, six years before, she had married Tom Deane, every one considered it a good match. A year or so afterwards, his sister had died; so Tom took his mother to live with him. There was an end to the young wife’s comfort. Mrs. Deane considered herself a martyr. No one had ever worked so hard, or made so many sacrifices, or borne trials so patiently. Hers had been no harder than the common lot, but she had a way of magnifying the slightest events.

She seemed to take particular delight in thwarting her daughter-in-law. One of those selfish, complaining, irritable, and unreasonable women who make old age unlovely, and are a torment to a household.

She insisted upon calling her Betsey, and nearly worried the poor wife into a shadow. Tom could get rid of his mother's ill-temper by going out to have a smoke, but there was no such relief for Bessy.

Now she gave Jessie's hand a fond squeeze, wiped her eyes with her apron, and said in her usual tone, which always seemed to beg her listeners not to find fault, —

“We were looking at baby.”

“You'd better look to the others — they're both out of doors, and it's cold as any winter's day. Dear! if it wasn't for me — sick and worn out as I am — things would come to a pretty pass in this house! It's a hard matter to have the care of your grandchildren after you have brought up your own family!”

Bessy went to find the little truants. Old Mrs. Deane deigned to ask after Mr. Ashburton, and predicted that he would never get well; people at his time of life rarely did; and it wasn't likely that he would ever have his mind clear again. She was sure some one had told her that Mr. Ashburton was completely childish. And she'd heard that Philip had given up college — a good thing, in her opinion. Half the young men nowadays were ruined by going to college. Did Eleanor mean to teach school? — it was time she put her education to some use. She'd heard tending store was a good business, but it made girls forward and of so much consequence. “And you're old enough to go to a trade. I should advise dress-making, you're so handy at cutting out clothes.”

Jessie was much annoyed, but she was too well-bred to resent it from a person so much older than herself. Mrs. Deane really enjoyed other people's misfortunes. She would gladly have enlarged upon the topic; but Jessie

asked after her ailments, — an equally fruitful theme, — and tried to get away as soon as she could do so gracefully.

Bessie followed her to the gate. There was something touching and delicate in the woman's sympathy, albeit she was a person of no special refinement.

"O, Miss Jessie! you have been such a comfort! The Lord bless you wherever you go, and send you back again to Home Nook — I shall pray daily for that!"

Jessie could not help contrasting old Mrs Deane and Mrs. Rachel, as she had more than once. Both professed to be animated and controlled by the same love, but how different were its fruits! In the one, meekness, loving kindness, and the highest kind of charity, dealing generously with fellow-creatures in thought, word, and deed. Was not true religion the same everywhere?

She made the rest of her calls, and though pain was largely mingled with pleasure, now and then a word of sympathy, a look or a tone, went to her heart. Soon she would cease to be one of this pleasant community. Would she be forgotten?

As she was nearing home a carriage passed, containing two occupants. She knew the elegant gray ponies so well that she glanced up with an eager smile.

The elder lady bowed very coldly, and the fair young girl gave a languid nod. The warm blood rushed to Jessie's face, and every nerve quivered.

Mrs. Westlake had always made a great deal of Jessie and Madge, and May, her niece, had been on terms of intimate friendship with them. To be passed now in this indifferent manner gave her a keen pang.

Mrs. Westlake was secretly consoling herself that her son, whom she had half suspected of a penchant for Jessie, was away at this period. He was full of boyish impulsiveness, and there was no knowing what he might be tempted to do.

"You look tired," Mrs. Ashburton said, as Jessie entered the room — the brightness and animation faded from her face.

"It is so good to have you mamma!" and Jessie leaned against the fond bosom. "Poverty cannot destroy all our love and happiness."

"Where have you been?" her mother asked gently.

So Jessie began. Hetty Bright's little nest of a cottage was gone over, and the call at Mrs. Deane's.

"O, mamma! I hope I never shall have such an unhappy disposition. How one pities poor Bessie Deane! There's nothing in our lives as hard as that. But —"

"Well, Jessie!" For the soft eyes had roved off into the sunshine, and the little brain was in a brown study.

"Mamma, why do you suppose that religion makes one person happy, and seems to fail in the case of another?"

"The one person makes it a living, vital truth, and the other does not. I should be sorry to judge Mrs. Deane harshly, but if she does not render herself miserable, she certainly must those around her."

"She did not seem a bit sorry that we had lost our fortune, though she will miss some of its benefits."

"We must learn a lesson, my little girl, and not fall into the habit of aggravating our troubles, and thinking our lot the hardest. There are many rough paths in this world, but we will remember who has said, 'My grace shall be sufficient for thee.'"

Jessie did not mention her meeting with Mrs. Westlake. It was the first time that she had received any direct rebuff, and from this source it came with double keenness. And yet she was glad that it had not been Eleanor.

She understood the changes now as she never had before. She began to realize that they must fill an entirely different sphere. It was the greater trial because she was conscious of no alteration in herself. The virtues, graces, and refinements of the old life would be carried into the new; and yet who would seek them for their absolute worth? But were such summer friends worthy of regard and regret?

In this hour Jessie Ashburton drew still nearer to God

CHAPTER V.

A NEW HOUSE.

THE quiet tide of life was broken with the Ashburtons. Eleanor went to the city several times with Philip to look at houses, but always returned dispirited and moody.

At length, in despair, he said one night, —

“Madge, will you and Jessie go down with me to-morrow? I have been offered a house at quite a bargain. Eleanor looked at it once and thought it would not do, but I find that we cannot have much choice for the rent we will be able to pay.”

Madge was quite elated; Jessie, in her more quiet fashion, was equally pleased with this mark of Philip’s confidence.

“I am sorry that Nelly takes matters so hard,” Philip said, anxiously. “You two will have to assume the lead, with mamma’s counsel. And I think we can have quite a pretty little nest of a home without being very extravagant; for now, my small women, we are poor.”

“Jessie spends half her time in the kitchen, learning to cook,” exclaimed Madge, by way of encouragement.

“Bravo!” said Philip, laughingly. “The house is something of a journey up town, but you can see the river from it, and we shall have quite a garden.”

“That will suit mamma admirably.”

“Eleanor inclines to Brooklyn or Williamsburg, but the extra expense will more than make the difference in rent. This neighborhood is quiet and respectable, though the house is old-fashioned.”

“It will be the more cosy, then.”

"Madge, I am glad and thankful that you can always find a stray gleam of sunshine."

She smiled brightly at his commendation.

They started off in good spirits the next morning. The house was on the east side of the town—a long block, with some rather pretentious buildings at one end, a number of vacant lots between, and near the river this cluster of cottages, old-fashioned indeed.

"The very last one," said Philip.

Beyond rose a ledge of rock, but between that and the opposite shore of Long Island the river gleamed and sparkled in the spring sunshine. The house stood detached, as did all in this row, and, what was quite unusual in the way of adornment, a wisteria had climbed to the roof, and a month or two later would be trailing long sprays of green and lilac about the windows.

"Why, it *is* pretty," declared Madge. "And I like the wildness of the place about here. I couldn't get my breath in those houses;" and she nodded towards the brick row.

"They are to be let in tenements, a floor to a family. We looked at one. They are finished in a very pretty, modern fashion."

"But to be crowded in with other people!"

"No, we couldn't take that quite yet," said Philip, with rather a proud gesture.

They had a gay time exploring the interior. On the lower floor were two very fair-sized rooms, and back of the hall a large kitchen, with a basement wash-room quite convenient. Above there were three sleeping apartments, and one small one, with a garret over the whole.

"Why, I think we could do very well," said Madge, "only I'd like to have that horrid blue and buff paper taken off the parlor. I suppose that frightened Nelly. And if it could be painted up a little—O, do look at these funny brass knobs! Why, they are so small that one

can hardly take hold of them! And the mantels are so very high and quaint! O, it isn't Home Nook!" and the brightness died out of her voice.

"No," Philip returned, gravely.

"But the garden will be nice;" and Jessie took a glimpse out of the window. "There is a long grape arbor, and trees and rose-bushes."

"Thank you, Jessie, for seeing so much. It is quite the best thing for the rent that I have found, and I must give an answer to-morrow. I think we will have the paper changed, and the knobs. I could paint it myself."

They went over it again, arranging it for use. They would have one parlor, and a library or sitting-room. In the summer, they could cook down stairs, and use their kitchen exclusively for a dining-room. Mamma could have one of the second-floor apartments, Nelly one, which would be a sort of guest chamber, also — "if they ever had any company," appended Madge.

"And I'll take the small one," said Philip.

"If we have a servant, we must put her in the garret."

"I think we had better learn to do without," was Jessie's quiet rejoinder.

They explored nooks, and corners, and closets, and found them really capacious. Jessie looked at all with the eye of a housekeeper, for somehow she felt that Eleanor was not just the one to go into kitchen details.

"Now we will run around in the next street, and take a flying view of a house for four hundred."

"And this —?"

"I can have for three hundred dollars, by paying six months' rent in advance."

"Four hundred would be two thirds of your salary, Philip."

"Yes. Clement will help us out a little; but it seems right to begin with the utmost economy. If we are prospered, we can make a change."

"Yes," said Jessie, with quiet decision.

She remarked that Philip never spoke of their father being able to do anything again. What if Mrs. Deane's unkind surmise should prove correct?

The house was larger and a trifle more modern, besides having two bedrooms in the attic, but they thought they could have as many comforts in the small one.

"Now, I want you to see a suit of rooms in a tenement house that can be had for four hundred."

"I should not like it," said Jessie, promptly.

"They are very nice, and quite to one's self."

A second floor, containing parlor, kitchen, three bedrooms, a large clothes-press, and a bath-room. There were corniced ceilings, one marble mantel, doors grained in oak, and the whole had a very pretty, stylish air; but the sleeping-rooms were all small, and the yard was merely a square of grass, with clothes-line posts at the corners, and a flagged walk around.

"It's pretty," said Madge, "but I believe I like the other best for us."

"I am sure that I do," was Jessie's rejoinder.

"Philip, how do real poor people manage to live in a city?"

"In a year's time you will be able to answer the question," he replied, with a half-sad, half-playful smile.

"But, after all, we have some resources that very poor people cannot fall back upon."

And yet Jessie sighed. She was coming face to face with poverty very rapidly.

So they returned home, and talked the matter over with mamma. She approved of their decision, and the house was taken at once.

Eleanor listened in silence, esteeming her acquiescence a great sacrifice. Philip travelled to and fro, busy, energetic, and cheerful. Mr. Ashburton began to walk round his room, and business matters progressed towards a set-

tlement. Friends flocked in to comfort and assist, and some, perhaps from curiosity, to see how the Ashburtons bore their misfortune; for there seemed to be a strand of this underlying much of human nature, and though very few actually rejoiced over their downfall, more than one felt that it was not an altogether unsatisfactory turn in the wheel of fortune, where so much seems like chance.

Mr. Kenneth, their clergyman, was one of their firmest and most comforting friends. His mother, a very estimable widow lady, who was not likely to change her home, offered them room for pictures, or any choice articles they did not care to dispose of, as their new abode would be rather limited.

Philip took the girls down again to see how much it had improved. The obnoxious paper had been replaced by one chaste and neutral-tinted, the mantels, that had been a sort of dismal lead-colored imitation of marble, were black, and the paint fresh and really pretty.

"I did that myself!" announced Philip, with a touch of triumph. "And now look at our dining-room!"

Instead of the smoky wall, it was a soft grayish-pearl color.

"Phil, you are a jewel!" exclaimed Madge. "Why, we shall be a sort of Swiss Family Robinson — only we shall not live on an island."

"Now, we will bring the furniture down and arrange it. I haven't but about ten days' grace, and then I must take my place in the ranks."

But when they began to dismantle their beloved home, a sharp pang of anguish seized them all; for every corner and every article was associated with some tender remembrance. Jessie's tears fell silently, but now and then Madge broke down.

"I can't help it," she would say, with a sob. "It's so hard, after all! and now I begin to feel afraid that we shall never come back."

Philip, gaining daily experience, thought it quite problematical also. Fortunes were not so easily won. His own dreams he thrust into the background, and not even his mother guessed the pain he hid beneath the smiling face.

Was it wrong to pray for prosperity and happiness, and work faithfully for them? It did not seem an ignoble aim when hallowed by love and self-sacrifice. "For their sake," he said to himself, when the way looked long and dreary.

Eleanor assisted with a grave face and pre-occupied manner. It would have been a comfort now to hear her chide Madge's follies; but she preserved a silence that, while it had nothing actually sullen or cross in it, was still uncomfortable. Even her mother was shut out of her confidence.

The young girl was fighting a hard battle in her own strength. Nothing could soften this misfortune with her. Every day she felt her nameless little wants and longings, her artistic perceptions, her refinements, and subtle harmonies rushing over her, and flooding her very soul. Then the contact with coarse materialisms—for so she would call them—stung her into keenest misery. Jessie's quiet persistence and Madge's energy roused a bitter feeling. They did not suffer as she. They were not giving up their very life, wrenching their souls out of the true orbit.

With the exception of the piano and two or three pictures, the parlor was to remain untouched. Their sitting-room and library furniture was transferred to the new house, and when the two rooms were put in order, Philip declared them charming. Their dining-room needed much more simplicity, and some of their chamber furniture was quite too elegant for their new station.

As they drew near the end, Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton went to spend a few days with Mrs. Kenneth. Madge

and Jessie worked unweariedly, and Eleanor, too, did good service.

"Poor Nelly!" Madge said, pityingly, in her absence. "Aunt Waltham was right—it *is* harder for her. She doesn't seem meant for poverty and toil. I wish something nice could happen to her;" and the generous child racked her brains, wondering what would be "nice."

"And it is mean that a little money should make such difference. She is as good and handsome as she was before, and it seems to me that she ought to be loved the better for her misfortunes. And yet see that young Maxwell—you know we always thought he looked like a hero, and I'm sure that he was quite devoted to Nelly—and on Sunday he and his sister swept by in state, giving her the merest little nod—but, O, didn't she look like a queen! And Mrs. Westlake and May Rossiter—who would have thought of *their* being so ungenerous?"

"Isn't that rather severe, Madge?"

"No," was the frank and ready rejoinder. "If May had lost her fortune, and we were riding round in our carriage, do you suppose we should pass her with a disdainful little sniff? O, Jessie! why isn't the world better and kinder? It is in trial and adversity that one most needs love and tenderness."

"Yes," Jessie faltered, "but we cannot have everything just as we would like."

"And yet I don't see why these grand, heroic things cannot beautify common life. See what Phil has given up; yet no one praises him, or seems to think it at all beyond the merest duty."

"He is not doing it to be seen of men."

"But I would like some one to see it, all the same. There is a great deal of talk about noble and unselfish deeds; but are they really appreciated?"

"There is One who knows, Madge."

The girl was silent, revolving some tangled problem in

her mind. The world looked so wide and confused to her just then! Why were the good and true called upon to suffer, the selfish and cold-hearted prospered, burdens of all kinds coming together, and —

“Jessie, what do you do when everything looks wrong and hard,—unjust, I mean? Doesn’t it seem as if God sometimes forgot people for a while?”

“I don’t know,” Jessie returned slowly, her eyes going out to the distant heavens. “I feel as if I wanted to keep close to him, that I might not be forgotten; and he can make a little light shine on the darkest path.”

“I do not believe that I understand it in your way. When I see anything wrong and mean, I experience a strong desire to rush out and fight it to the end, set the matter right, and make others acknowledge it. I met May Rossiter a few days ago, and I wanted to say to her, ‘I am just as good and worthy without a dollar as I was three months ago, when papa was rich.’”

Jessie smiled at the energy and the face flushing to a brilliant color.

“We must let some things go, Madge,” she said. “You remember poor Don Quixote’s fate. No one but God can right all the wrong things in the world.”

“More’s the pity!” and Madge sighed.

“Do you want a human deliverer? O, Madge, that is a dangerous longing.”

“I would like to have matters set straight.”

“But that can only be in heaven. And if God places us here to work out a destiny, we must take up the duty that lies nearest; I believe we shall always find that sufficient.”

Madge was silent, but her active mind went traversing limitless space. She was daring, and but for her extreme honesty and love of truth, would have been easily set astray.

One April morning, the last of their possessions were

carried out of dear old Home Nook. Madge wandered up and down declaring that it was just like a funeral. Among the trees the birds were chirping and sending out little trills on the mellow air. Down there the maples would bud, the lilacs shower wafts of spicy sweetness, and the wind make long, tremulous furrows in the tall June grass. Here on the porch, roses and honeysuckle would bloom in riotous beauty, and the flowers they had tended with such care would delight other hearts and eyes.

Madge suddenly felt rebellious and defiant. What had they done that this great trouble should come upon them?

Eleanor paced slowly down the stairs and through the wide hall. She was very pale — so stricken, indeed, that Jessie longed to clasp her arms about the slender form and comfort her. The pain and suffering had not lifted her out of herself, nor ennobled her in any respect. The self-reliance had not the vital pith of an heroic soul, but the pride of a narrow one. There was a strange sinking about the eyes, and a look that in a tenderer face would have been wistful. But the scarlet lips were still defiant, and in strong contrast with the pallor of the brow.

Ah, Eleanor Ashburton, you think now that life has no greater trial to offer than leaving behind all these luxuries, and going out into what you call the desert. But there are strifes that rend the soul, pangs that go deeper than loss of wealth and station. It may be yours to know all this, to find yourself solitary and friendless, and to cry from the depths of despair to the God whom you now slight.

"Come," Philip began, in his cheery way; "we are going to seek our fortunes in a new world. Just here on the threshold let us pray that we may return."

Would they ever? Glancing at each other with sorrowful young eyes, the voices were too tremulous to utter any response. Perhaps the silent prayers were heard above by Him whom nothing escapes.

The servants, except Hannah, had been discharged a few days before. She was to accompany them, and was fain to remain; but Mrs. Ashburton was too conscientious to take advantage of her devotion. One and another thronged round for a last good by; but at length they were seated in the cars. How frequently they had taken the short journey for pleasure!

The fragrant breath of the spring morning came in delicious wafts as they passed reaches of meadows broken by hurrying streams, or clumps of pungent cedars of deepest green. The sunshine quivered in the air like a tremulous veil, but their eyes were dim to beauty. All the tender grace of the world seemed left behind at Home Nook.

Madge was the first to rally. For all they had spent days in arranging their new house, it was still far from perfect. There was some unpacking yet to be done, and the home-like touches to add. Philip was to go back after his parents, and the three girls went to work with much energy.

"What a lucky thing that there is a grate here!" exclaimed Madge. "I'm going to build a tiny fire, for it will be chilly this evening."

She longed to add that it would also give a touch of the place that had always been so dear, but she deemed it wiser not to call up the recollection. As the fire blazed in its blue and scarlet gleams, her courage returned. Jessie slid into the housekeeping niche most gracefully. Indeed, so engrossed were they that the afternoon sped by almost unheeded.

A carriage rolled through the street and halted at the door. Philip assisted his mother out, and Jessie ran to give her a welcome. Mr. Ashburton followed, leaning heavily on his son, and they were ushered into the library, as they had christened the back parlor. Pretty and familiar things were grouped about, quaint brackets with a

vase, or a little marble bust that had commended itself to some one's love, the well-known pictures, papa's easy-chair and the great, roomy lounge in green reps. In the chimney recesses stood two book-cases that just filled the space. One had belonged to Philip, and the other to the girls.

"It is really delightful!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashburton. "I think you must have been gifted with fairy skill. Why, we hardly miss anything!"

She could not have bestowed more precious praise upon Madge and Jessie.

Mr. Ashburton was made comfortable upon the lounge. Eleanor arranged his pillow and threw a light afghan over his shoulders. The younger ones took their mother through the house, displaying each room with no little pride.

"It is quite wonderful," she said, in her sweet fashion. "I feel as if we might be very happy here."

"O, mamma, if we should be!"

"And why not, Jessie?"

There was a look of calm and tender resignation in the fair face that it was good to behold—a kind of glorified endurance.

"My darlings," Mrs. Ashburton said, "God has left us the greatest of all blessings in preserving our little household unbroken. We must show our gratitude by not repining at what he saw best to take. I believe I could spare the fortune more readily than any of you."

"O, mamma, I begin to think it will not be so terrible, after all. And now look at our rooms. Philip insisted upon taking this little one. Nelly's will have to be used if we have any company."

"I do not suppose that we shall be altogether neglected."

"Some one will want to see how we look, and if we bear our misfortunes well," Madge said, with satirical gayety.

"I hope that we have a few friends actuated by a higher motive than curiosity," Mrs. Ashburton rejoined with tender gravity.

"There is a good deal of meanness and selfishness in the world," Madge made energetic reply.

"My darling, it pains me to see you begin life with this spirit of railing. Can we not give others credit for as much generosity and kindness as we possess?"

Madge was silent from regard to her mother. Eleanor fancied that the careless and light-hearted child was not capable of much suffering; but many things during the past month had stung her keenly.

They did not finish their examination a moment too soon, for just then the dinner-bell rang.

"Help me out, Philip," Mr. Ashburton said to his son. "I want to take this first meal in our new home with you all."

As he uttered the words "our new home," it touched them with a sense of nearness they had not experienced before. And though it was an effort to totter out to the dining-room and sit through the meal, growing more exhausted with every second, yet he bore up for his children's sakes.

His illness had told fearfully upon him, and he looked like an old man. His eyes were sunken, and the lines had deepened in his thin cheeks. His whole frame trembled at the slightest motion, and his voice had in it a strangely weak quaver.

Yet, on the whole, it was an enjoyable meal, more cheerful than they could have imagined. And though Mr. Ashburton had to be taken to bed immediately afterwards, he begged his wife to spend the evening with the children.

"I surely can spare you for a little while," he said, "after having had all your time of late."

Mrs. Ashburton found the young folks in quite an

animated discussion about household affairs. It was rather warm, and, in some respects, Utopian. Eleanor, perhaps, best understood the value of money.

Philip announced to them that, after all expenses were paid, they would have about seven hundred dollars remaining. This he proposed to place in a bank for a sort of reserve-fund. Eleanor had said that they could not live on Philip's salary.

"But I'm thankful that we shall not have to call upon Clement this year. It is high time that we heard from him. And who will write?"

Philip paused, for his voice was a trifle unsteady.

"I will," said Mrs. Ashburton. "And I believe that we shall find him both sympathizing and generous."

"If he can buy back Home Nook some day!"

They all hoped in their hearts that he might possess both the desire and the ability.

"I believe I shall learn to do something," Madge declared. "I must dream out my splendid possibilities!"

"And now let us sing 'Naomi' for our evening hymn," said Mrs. Ashburton.

Eleanor went to the piano. Mrs. Ashburton had a purpose in proposing this hymn. It had always been a great favorite of hers, for the sweet content breathed in every line. And as the young voices blent with Philip's rich tenor, she observed with pain that one was silent. How they lingered over the last dear line, —

"And crown my journey's end," —

as if it were indeed a prayer.

"Good night."

It was their mother's voice and kiss. They had taken the first important step in their journey; but how and where would it end?

CHAPTER VI.

ROMANCE AND EXPERIENCE.

A NEW life indeed. Its social aspects were so widely different that it took the family some time to feel at all settled in their new sphere. They would have been more than human if they could have submitted to the change at once, and kindly. Every day, dozens of trifling wants and sacrifices bore down upon them, making in the aggregate a burden not easily borne as yet.

Philip accepted his position with a sturdy manliness. At eight in the morning he took his place at the desk, with piles of correspondence before him, through which he waded, answered, and placed on file, vibrating between this and the journal-like ledger. He had to endure the imperious ways of consequential elders, and a species of sneering impertinence from ill-bred and rather jealous juniors, who considered him an interloper, promotion being generally the rule in this large mercantile house. From three till six the seniors finished their work, and dropped off slowly, and Philip was thankful when he could close the tiresome pages and set his face homeward.

Hannah had remained a week, and then left reluctantly. Jessie insisted upon trying the post of housekeeper first, for, as Mr. Ashburton appeared rather poorly again, his wife devoted herself chiefly to nursing. Eleanor took the supervision of the rooms, and Madge declared, dismally, that there was nothing left for her.

She did not find much time to be idle, however. There was the yard to tidy, and the flower-beds to be put in order; errands to do, sweeping, cleaning, and odds and ends of all kinds, which generally fell to her lot.

When they came to the end of May, the monthly accounts were made out. It seemed that they had given up all the luxuries and every needless expense, except a few delicacies for their father. And yet the expenses during the month had amounted to nearly one hundred dollars!

The girls glanced at each other in dismay.

"Just twice Philip's salary," said Eleanor. "I said that we could not live on that. And when we come to buy clothes —"

"I'm sure we have studied over every dish and every dollar — haven't we, Madge?" Jessie began, in great earnest, as if she felt herself tacitly accused of extravagance.

"And had the very simplest of lunches and desserts. How *do* poor people live?"

They still retained their late dinners on Philip's account, but they had been shorn of much of their elegance. Indeed, the girls had prided themselves upon being particularly economical, and consulted mamma beforehand.

"We must try again," said Jessie, hopefully. "When we come to have experience —"

"I wish I could do something," interrupted Madge, energetically. "We have everything in such good order now that I might be spared."

Eleanor flushed and bit her lip. This seemed a covert thrust for her, though Madge had no such thought.

"What could you do?" she asked, with something like contempt.

"I do not know;" and a lovely color mantled the child's face. "Around on the avenue there is a girl tending in a fancy store. She gets four dollars a week."

"Madge, have you no more pride than to mix up with such people?" demanded Eleanor, angrily, her dark eyes flashing.

Madge was abashed. She had fallen into a friendly talk with the girl one day, who, finding herself an object of interest, did not hesitate to make her case as entertaining as possible.

"But, Nelly —"

"I am sure neither mamma nor Philip would tolerate such an idea! You are too young, and such positions always give a girl a bold and flippant manner; and you are careless enough now, Madge. If you must do anything presently, there is school teaching, which is always respectable —"

"And which would kill me, I am sure. I never could endure that."

A ring at the door made a break in the discussion. Madge ran, and brought back a letter for Eleanor.

"From aunt Waltham," she said, handing it to her sister.

Eleanor broke the seal of violet-colored wax containing her aunt's aristocratic monogram. Then she read in silence. The others could not well renew the conversation; so Jessie took up some sewing that was in her kitchen work-basket.

"Aunt Waltham is coming next week," said Eleanor, presently. "She will spend Tuesday with us."

That was not the most agreeable announcement in the world, but the girls took it without comment.

Philip laughed a little at their long faces that evening, when they related their poor attempt at economy.

"Why, I think that does very well," he said. "You will learn much by experience, and there have been several articles purchased this month that we may not need in some time again."

"But by the end of the year we shall have all our money spent," rejoined Jessie, in a tone of apprehension.

"Well, we may be doing better another year — at least, I may. Just now, you see, my age is against me. Every year tells on a salary."

Philip spoke hopefully, as he believed. Having taken hold of work in good earnest, he would look only at the bright side.

"And there is always Clement to fall back upon," pursued Madge.

"I have a fancy that I should like to work through without any help from Clement. I know just how he will feel about the loss of Home Nook, and he will never rest until it is ours again. So if we could save that much for him, it would be like adding to the store."

"Dear Phil, when I hear you talk it seems as if we might have it; but I am doubtful."

"Well, we'll do the best we can."

"But some of us ought to help."

Madge uttered this with a perplexed face. She was quite anxious to know Philip's opinion concerning employment for girls.

"I think you do assist," he said, gravely. "For a month we have only had a woman come in to wash and iron. You have kept the house in order, cooked, gone to market, and helped wait upon papa. I have found no buttons off, had plenty of collars and handkerchiefs, and have not been compelled to go without my breakfast. Are you not satisfied with that praise, O small housekeeper?"

They both laughed. Madge felt that she must give up her point for the present, but it only slept in the active brain, and was ready to wake at the first summons.

"I am glad that you do not feel discouraged with us," Jessie said, almost gayly.

"Discouraged! No, indeed."

Then they talked a little about aunt Waltham's visit, which was rather dreaded.

"Girls," said Philip, "she must take us just as we are. And I think aunt Waltham is very sensible in some matters. She will not expect the elegance of Home Nook in this little nest, and I'm sure Jessie cooks nicely enough for a queen."

"And Madge can make lovely desserts," was Jessie's comforting rejoinder.

It could hardly be said that Mr. Ashburton improved at all. Some days he cheered them a good deal by coming

down stairs and taking a walk around the garden, as Madge insisted upon calling it. Small as it was, it proved quite a source of interest and pleasure. The lilacs had budded, and the honeysuckle thrust out long, brownish-red tendrils, that suggested sweetness and bloom. The peach tree was ready to shower the glory of its pale pink blossoming, and Philip had brought home several clusters of pansies, and a lovely monthly rose.

Mr. Ashburton glanced at them listlessly, as if his mind was far away. It had certainly received a severe shock. Then there were days when he hardly left his couch, and his pallid face filled them all with alarm.

Mr. Stanhope had gone to Europe, though no one knew in exactly what capacity, taking his daughter with him. Mr. Ashburton had not seen him since the commencement of his illness, and he had felt quite hurt at this want of friendly interest. It could hardly be called that, either, for he had always been eager in his inquiries. Frequently had he said to Philip, "I was coming up to Riverside yesterday, but this or that event occurred. Remember me to your father, and tell him that I shall surely be up in a day or two."

A few days before his sailing he had hurried into Philip's place of business.

"I just stepped in to leave a good by for your father," he exclaimed, in apparent haste. "It is too bad that I've not seen him, for we have been the best of friends many a year, and I'm sorry to go away without; but my time is so brief, and I have been just driven every moment. We both tried to do our best, I'm sure, and no one can regret this unfortunate affair more deeply than I. Give him my sincerest regards, and my hopes for his recovery and prosperity. I have set out to do the best that I can."

"He wanted to see you very much," Philip could not help saying; and he gave a quick, scrutinizing glance at the other's face.

Mr. Stanhope colored, and his peculiar light-gray eyes wavered somewhat.

"It is just possible that I may run up a moment. Give me the number, please; and I am sure that I wish you all success, though there are many changes in life;" and he sighed.

Philip went on with his writing, but he could not dismiss the half suspicion that Mr. Stanhope was at the bottom of their misfortunes. He *had* acted rather singularly. Mr. Weir, who had now gone to Chicago, had once expressed something like a doubt, and it haunted Philip persistently. He never whispered it at home, however.

Mr. Ashburton felt the coldness and neglect keenly, though he made no sign. After this last message, he waited in a nervous, expectant state, the disappointment rendering him noticeably worse.

He had never been able to recall the exact conversation of that fatal morning. It seemed to him that he had in the heat of the moment expressed some unguarded doubt or suspicion that he regretted the instant after. The swarthy flush upon Mr. Stanhope's face and the flash of his eye had startled him in many a dreaming moment since. Then that endless and confusing mass of figures, the appalling losses, the sort of crushing, hopeless weight that seemed to be dashed upon him, still made him shiver.

He knew that Home Nook was sold, and that he had come out of the wreck with a good name; but it was the dreary waste between that so troubled him. If some one could set the weak brain straight, and tell him what was reality, and how much feverish dreams and reveries! Or if he could recover! But this lapse of time and energy upon a sick-bed seemed unendurable.

Madge's two or three unwittingly pointed sentences stirred an uncomfortable feeling in Eleanor's soul. She kept thinking of it that night in the solitude of her own

room, after the rest were in peaceful slumber. She could not deny but that the new life had entailed some duty upon her as well as the rest. If Philip was unable to meet the family expenses, she surely came next on the list.

What should she do? Teach school, as she had recommended to Madge? Situations in private schools were generally dispensed to those who were well armed with credentials, and, perhaps, for public schools one would need favor or friends. She shrank from both with intense disgust. There was music left, but how could she gain any pupils? And could her fine, sensitive nerves stand the rude shocks such labor would bring?

She could be spared the best, it was true. She had a bitter feeling that no one would miss her or long for her, that the girls would be really happier without her. It was her misfortune to be so far removed from ordinary souls that she could feel very little sympathy with their tastes and aims. Hers were so different. Any great and heroic task she would be quite ready for, but these petty, wearying cares were distasteful in the last degree.

In this mood she turned again to aunt Waltham's letter, with its dangerous tenderness and counsel. Eleanor felt that here she was indeed understood; that her shrinking from aught that was commonplace or coarse was appreciated to the full. And when that lady mentioned that she had a plan to propose which might render dear Eleanor's life more comfortable, she knew that she might trust in its being something that she could accept.

Not that Eleanor had complained — she was too proud for that, even if her delicacy had not kept her from such a step. But there had been a weariness and foreboding in her letters that her aunt understood well, and generously hastened to the rescue.

I say generously, for Mrs. Waltham was a selfish woman, and not quite as rich as she delighted to appear. Her regret now was, that she had not insisted, the summer before,

upon giving her a fashionable tour, instead, of having her go to Canada with her parents, and ramble around old churches and nunneries. The family prestige would have afforded her a fine opportunity of marriage; but she was still young and handsome, and it was worth trying.

Eleanor ended her troubled thoughts at last by resolving to wait until aunt Waltham came. So she looked forward anxiously to the following Tuesday, while it came quite too soon for the girls.

A handsome carriage set Mrs. Waltham down at her brother's house. The unfashionable neighborhood was bad enough, but this mean abode! Poor Eleanor, indeed!

It looked very cheerful and pretty within, this June morning. A small vase of flowers stood on the centre-table, and the piano was open. She entered with her arm around Eleanor, and her voice modulated to the tenderest inflection.

"My poor child, how wonderfully you have borne the trial! Why, you are not as worn and faded as I felt almost sure you must be."

Eleanor flushed, perhaps with a little conscious pride.

This had been Mrs. Waltham's greatest fear, and to find her so fresh and lovely banished the last misgiving.

Jessie and Madge came in, presently, to see their aunt, and found her exceedingly gracious. Mrs. Ashburton, too, met with a warm greeting. In fact, aunt Waltham was in her most delightful mood.

In spite of Philip's injunction, Madge begged for one or two little luxuries for lunch.

"For aunt is so sweet and pleasant that I feel like making everything as nice as possible," she said. "I expected that she would look down upon us with supreme contempt."

After an hour spent in her brother's room, and at the dainty lunch, which she actually praised, she and Eleanor took possession of the parlor.

"What do you think of papa?" the young girl asked.

"Why, it seems to me that he has scarcely improved since I left Home Nook in March. He is looking very poorly."

Eleanor sighed.

"It is a hard trial. I do not see how you are all to get along."

"That is what troubles me every day and hour!" Eleanor exclaimed, with sudden vehemence.

Suppose this foolish girl had made some quixotic resolves for herself!

"My dear Nelly," she began, in her soft, persuasive voice, "a great part of my visit here to-day was to you. I have some plans that I want to discuss, and I have been thinking about your future. If you were a young man of twenty, you might plunge into the world and soon do for yourself; but women seem peculiarly helpless unless they well nigh unsex themselves, as many of the present day are doing. I have always taken a warm interest in you, as you well know, and if you were alone you would find a kind friend in me, I assure you."

"You have been such a comfort already," murmured Eleanor.

"I fancy that you must sometimes have a misgiving that you are not quite appreciated in this household. Some few rare souls, Eleanor, are born to a higher estate than that which fate thrusts upon them, and you are one. I know how this life must annoy you — what a daily trial it is."

Now and then a gleam of strong, pure truth shot across Eleanor Ashburton's brain, drowning out these misty fancies and longings that she called her nature. And just at this instant she felt that it was cowardly not to make a protest for the others. But she said, rather hesitatingly, —

"It is a sore trial to us all."

"But Jessie seems quite in her element, and will make a much more sensible woman than if she had run wild about Riverside, considering herself a Lady Bountiful.

"No, they are quite different from you."

It was very true — Eleanor could not gainsay that, and was silent.

"So, my dear, I think of taking you in charge this summer. I spoke to your papa, and he appeared pleased, I fancied. It is so hard to be shut out of all the pleasures that girls of your age love."

If ever Eleanor was to make a stand, now was the time to do it. In the depths of her heart there was a vague idea that it would be more truly noble to share poverty and toil with the stricken home-circle than to accept this opportunity of ease and gayety. Her pulses rushed to a sudden heat, but there was no strong power to weld them into the requisite strength and shape.

"My dear, you are very silent," said aunt Waltham, dryly.

Eleanor flushed deeply.

"I think — aunt —" she began, falteringly, "that I ought to stay at home —"

"Nonsense, Eleanor!" with some asperity. "What good can you do? Madge and Jessie are sufficient for the housework, and your father surely, does not need more than one nurse. With Philip's salary, every one counts. So, do not be foolish."

It seemed curious to Eleanor, in her after-life, that she took this sharp retort so meekly. Her mental forces were very evenly balanced, and a feather's weight one way or the other decided the case.

Aunt Waltham gained it, of course. She set forth eloquently the advantage Eleanor's absence would prove, and the great benefit that might accrue to the girl herself.

"For you have never actually been in society. The money spent upon that foolish tour of last summer would have given you a position at once; but your mother thinks very little of the future. My dear child, you will find your best friend in me."

She leaned over and kissed Eleanor tenderly.

"Mamma was quite willing?" she asked.

"Of course. And your father favors it. He feels keenly the misfortune he has brought upon you all."

"O, aunt! don't;" and Eleanor's face paled with helpless supplication.

"Yes, you might as well have had something! Doesn't even the Bible recommend that one make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness? It sounds very pretty to despise money, but we shall hardly be able to do without it before the millennium comes."

Then Mrs. Waltham changed her tone, thinking that she had flavored her speech sufficiently. The tenderness was very hard for Eleanor to resist.

She dilated glowingly on her plans for the summer. A friend, whose husband was absent in Europe, had begged her to spend three months at least with her at Newport, where Mr. Gifford owned an elegant little nest. And if they could find some agreeable young lady —

She understood just what pretty and foolish Mrs. Gifford wanted. Her husband's sisters, neither of them very young, would be rather severe censors. She, Mrs. Waltham, could do the matronly part with high breeding and style, and this young lady would be an apparent attraction for visitors.

Mrs. Gifford was quite too discreet to compromise herself in any manner—that Mrs. Waltham knew. There would be a great deal of the best society at the house, and if Eleanor happened to attract some one's attention, so much the better for her. The child was capable of gracing any station.

She did not think it necessary to explain to her brother or sister-in-law the particulars of the invitation, and when she mentioned very delicately that she should take charge of Eleanor's expenses, they could only thank her for her generosity. Mrs. Waltham gained a great deal of credit one way and another on a very small capital.

I am not sure but that both parents had a dim suspicion of the end in view. Mr. Ashburton questioned within his weak mind whether he had any right to keep his child from a pleasant future, if it chanced to smile upon her, since he would never be able to restore the past brightness. And the mother felt too sure of her daughter's truth and honor to dream for a moment that she would sully it by any worldly devices or a mercenary marriage.

It was settled, before aunt Waltham took her leave, that Eleanor should accompany her. There was not much time to be lost, so in a few days she would be up again with a dress-maker, and Eleanor's wardrobe must undergo a renovation, and perhaps sundry additions.

Eleanor rather dreaded Philip's verdict, but to her surprise it was very agreeable.

"Well, why shouldn't she do something nice for you girls?" said he, frankly. "I remember once that papa saved quite a large part of her fortune from ruin, and you are the only nieces she has, for she does not affect her husband's relatives a great deal. I suppose whatever is left will come to us in the end; though it seems odd for *us* to count upon any one's money — doesn't it? And I hope Nelly will have a delightful time."

CHAPTER VII.

SHIFTING SANDS.

ELEANOR ASHBURTON was not certain that this Newport plan pleased her. It had looked quite tempting, at first, in the change and relief which it promised, and the time it gave her for consideration. She fancied that she was trying earnestly to decide what it was best to do with her future life — what her duties were to her parents and sisters.

And yet she was much deceived in herself. The strongest desire of all was to escape from the distasteful hardships with which her path appeared to be encompassed. Jessie and Madge might take to them with the ardent romance of youth to which every change has its charms, but she felt it all too keenly. She, too, had a vague idea of the result in view, and this was what gave her the almost morbid shrinking, and yet could not supply sufficient courage for one brave step.

She knew enough of the world to understand that many very fair marriages were entered into from motives of interest. It must be confessed that some of them were far more comfortable than the desperate so-called love-matches. But her daily example had been one of the highest and purest love, the reverence and sacred faith that must be the foundation of true household life. Through all their misfortunes she had never heard her mother utter one word of regret for herself. She could cheerfully have accepted one room and the plainest fare, so that her husband was spared.

Not so with Eleanor. She found herself reverting to many of her aunt's ideas concerning the business. If papa *had* made a little provision in prosperity—if there was some slight dependence besides Philip and Clement!

Aunt Waltham gave her little time for reflection. The house was quite alive with bustle and interest. The dress-maker went to work remodelling, and fashioned most wonderful and elegant garments out of the past summer's attire. A pale, quiet woman, verging on to middle life, whose taste should have given her a much higher position, but she suited Mrs. Waltham admirably, as there would be no danger of her gossiping about these economical arrangements. Now and then Eleanor was tempted to demur a little at some unusual finery, but it was quickly checked.

"Nonsense, child; what do you know of such things? You are much too pretty to look dowdy and old-fashioned."

She did not add, which was the truth, that she could not afford to have this campaign lost.

The younger girls were wild with delight at the beautiful transformations. Jessie, who was quick with her needle, spent all her spare time in assisting, and, in the course of a fortnight, Eleanor found her wardrobe in perfect order, and quite elegant, at a very small expense.

June came in warm, and the fashionable season opened early. Eleanor and aunt Waltham were to start at the middle of the month.

The young girl had been roused to new interest, it must be confessed. The pleasure that the others anticipated for her in some measure reacted upon herself. The gay dresses, the pleasant flutter, the bright faces around her growing tenderer with the parting in view, rendered her quite like her olden self, or, perhaps, more fond; for usually Eleanor Ashburton was not a demonstrative girl.

Mr. Ashburton, lying on his couch with wistful eyes, felt his heart yearn over his eldest daughter. He had always

taken a peculiar pride in her, and he shrank now from allowing her thus to appear a suppliant for the world's favor. His ideas had always been at variance with his worldly-wise sister, and he dreaded to trust his darling to her care.

Yet from the first it would have appeared selfish to restrain her. Perhaps, through a fatal lack of discretion, or energy and prudence at the proper moment, he had in some degree blighted their lives. Helpless himself, he must not make their burdens too heavy. And so he could only commend her to God.

"My darling," her mother said, "I think you understand some of the temptations that may come in your path. In the whirl and excitement of pleasure, the highest good may be so easily forgotten! Can I not trust you to remember?"

Eleanor colored as her glance met the tender yet steady eyes of her mother.

"There is a loftier purpose to life than mere enjoyment, though I do not wish to shadow yours now. Still, I cannot let you go without a word of counsel."

"Mamma," Eleanor returned, rather proudly, "you may trust me without a misgiving. I have no desire to rush into follies and frivolities."

"It is not merely those quicksands. An unguarded step sometimes opens the door to disastrous consequences. Aunt Waltham's views are so different on many points, that I should tremble if I thought her likely to gain any ascendancy over you."

Eleanor smiled. "I am not so weak or impulsive as to be easily swayed against my judgment," she said, decisively.

"And yet we can do so little in our own strength. O, my child, if I knew that in any doubt or difficulty you would rely upon this higher power!"

A peculiar expression crossed Eleanor's face, leaving it cold and reticent. Mrs. Ashburton had always felt her

self shut out, in some measure, from her eldest daughter's confidence. The fine sympathy, the tender nearness that distinguished both Madge and Jessie, had always seemed wanting in her; and though from early girlhood there had been little to complain of in the almost critically correct character, the glowing, vitalizing influence of that highest of all motives had appeared lacking.

She was silent now, feeling consciously the gulf between; neither did she wish to pain her mother by any expression of indifference, which, after all, she did not really feel. In one respect her heart was very tender on this last day that they were to be together in a long while.

Ah, why must there so often be a veil between? Truly said the apostle, "For now we see through a glass darkly." Is it not so in human love, as well as divine? And so the grace of the moment is dimmed by a cold look, a careless turn of the head, or a silence that sways the current, and the barques that might have floated in dearest harmony down the sea of content drift far apart, watched by pitying angels. On what far ocean will they meet again?

The mother breathed a fervent prayer with her farewell. Would her child come back to her the same in heart? It is well that we learn to trust, that faith abides so long in the soul, or some burdens would be heavy indeed.

They kissed her many times, and wished her all manner of delight and enjoyment. Then the carriage door shut with a sharp click, and the travellers were on their way.

Mrs. Waltham surveyed her companion with a great deal of complacency. She fancied that she was conferring a very generous favor, and meant to make her undertaking a success. If Eleanor married well, it would be an excellent thing for the family. She, in turn, could chaperon Madge or Jessie — Madge most likely, as she promised the more brilliancy and effectiveness. It would be a great relief to her poor brother, she thought, with pitying condescension.

The picture opposite was a fair one, certainly ; this elegant girl, with a figure and style that would be the envy of half the women with whom she came in contact ; for Mrs. Waltham was not ignorant of the petty jealousies and rivalries of society that are so often hidden under a charming demeanor. But her attractiveness did not end there. The pure complexion requiring no aid from art ; the fine, soft, abundant hair framing in the face with a suggestive, shadowy twilight, relieved by the vivid scarlet of the curved lips, and the slow-moving, lustrous eyes. Little did Eleanor guess that she was being appraised for the matrimonial market, and that every line, every grace of nature was scanned with a critical eye, from the small, faultlessly gloved hand, lying carelessly in her lap, to the slender foot, with its arching instep.

"Yes," aunt Waltham mentally commented, "she is sure to marry well. She has no foolish romance about her, but is a dear, sensible girl, and has never been half appreciated by her family."

She might not have been so well satisfied if she had known Eleanor's thoughts. Conscience was making a strong protest. It *was* cowardly to take this ease and enjoyment while the others were left to bear the burden and heat of the day. This queenly air and the haughty curl of the lip, that her aunt was studying with infinite satisfaction, was the result of the latent contempt in which she held herself. If she had dared, she would have stopped the carriage now and gone back ; but some spell stronger than this desire restrained her, and so she drifted on to fate, confident that the strength unable to save her here could rescue her triumphantly elsewhere.

For the next few days they were very busy at home restoring order to the rooms that had been brought into constant confusion by the late preparations. Madge declared that she was thankful for a little quiet, and Mrs. Ashburton felt relieved in spite of her anxieties.

It was destined to be of short duration, however. Philip came home in a thoughtful mood.

"Dr. Conway was here to-day." Jessie announced.

The kind-hearted physician dropped in now and then, having a friendly interest in his patient.

"Yes, I asked him to call. He came to see me afterwards."

"Philip!" and Madge started in dismay.

"My dear Madge, there is no cause for alarm; at least, it was merely to satisfy myself."

"But you think papa worse?" she said, in quick alarm.

"No, not worse, but he is making very little, if any, progress towards recovery. I wanted to know what Dr. Conway thought."

Both girls looked at him with eager, questioning eyes, Jessie's face pale with apprehension, while Madge's flexible, nervous lips quivered in pain.

"Dr. Conway proposes a change to some stronger and more bracing air. He needs rousing, both physically and mentally, and there is nothing here to do it."

"But where could he go?"

"Dr. Conway mentioned a place up at the Catskill Mountains — not among the fashionable resorts, but at a roomy, quiet country-house, where he would have the privilege of a drive every day, and the terms would not be very expensive."

Philip looked doubtfully at the girls as he said this. He wanted to ask another question, but a peculiar feeling restrained him.

"We need not go!" Madge exclaimed, decisively, interpreting the perplexed expression.

"If you girls wouldn't mind staying at home — and yet you do need a holiday."

"But we can hardly afford it," returned Jessie, quietly. "Our expenses last month were quite heavy, and we must begin to economize;" with a sweet, patient smile.

"How much will it cost for them?" asked Madge, going at once to the practical part.

"They took two friends of the doctor's, last summer, for fifteen dollars a week, which is very cheap; but then the place is quite beyond the fashionable limits. I asked him to write and inquire for me."

Philip sighed a little. Poverty had its inconveniences, it must be confessed. He felt tempted to send them all, and shut up the house.

"It will be a very good plan," said Jessie, "and just what papa needs. The confinement begins to tell upon mamma, too, I fancy, and so it will be best to try a change."

"You ought to go, too," Philip began remorsefully.

"No," returned Madge, clearly. "You would be very lonesome, and since we are both well and strong we do not need the trip. If they could remain through the two warm months, it would be so nice!"

"Dr. Conway feels confident that it will contribute materially to his recovery. Another year it might be too late."

Both girls shivered a little at this.

"We shall not mind staying at home, Phil, dear," Madge began presently, in a reassuring tone. "I have a host of things to do; and then the house will be in nice order for the return of the travellers. It is a splendid plan."

Her bright face, and rich, cheery voice, were worth a good deal. Philip felt lighter-hearted already.

Nothing happened to interfere. Mrs. Cummings would take the Ashburtons at her former reasonable terms, if they could put up with plain accommodations. A large room was at their service, and she would try to make it as pleasant as possible.

Dr. Conway announced all the particulars, and advised Mr. Ashburton to try, at least.

He was quite willing; so preparations were undertaken for another journey.

"The place has the merit of not being so very far off,"

Philip said, consolingly. "We can take a little trip up there occasionally."

"If papa only should get well," was Madge's strong hope, expressed dozens of times during the day.

He seemed to rally with the excitement, and a flush came now and then to his pale cheek. There was no parade of wardrobe this time, and the packing was not very extensive.

Eleanor had written twice, in very good spirits, and with a touch of affection and earnestness that set all doubts at rest. So that, although the parting was sad, there was much to inspire them with hope.

Philip had arranged for Madge and Jessie to make a brief visit at Riverside. He was to go with his parents and remain one night, and their staying alone in the house was not considered at all admissible. As yet they had made no intimacy with neighbors.

Madge proposed dozens of old friends and places, but Jessie had a longing for Hetty Bright's simple home and warm welcome. So, after seeing the three safely started, the two girls took the cars for that familiar place to which their hearts still clung.

Nothing could exceed the delight of Mrs. Rachel and her sister at this surprise. The two girls were kissed again and again by Miss Hetty, who cried one moment and laughed the next.

"Why, Miss Madge," she exclaimed, "you're prettier than ever! It is a good sight for old eyes. I believe I never missed anything in my life so much as you and Miss Jessie!"

Mrs. Rachel looked so cool and sweet in her old-fashioned lawn and black silk apron, her soft hair combed smoothly across her white forehead, making two or three tiny curves! There was a peculiar still, refined grace about her, as if the bustle and change of the world could never touch her. Jessie felt rested at the first glance. It was a bit of shady woodland fragrance after the glaring, dusty highway.

"But Jessie looks pale and care-worn. What have you been doing, my dear?"

"Why, nothing—very much," she replied, inconsequently.

"Jessie has turned into a royal housekeeper," said Madge, enthusiastically. "She doesn't exactly bake and brew, but there are so many things, when you have no servant! And the hardest part, you see, is puzzling our brains over economy! How much for so much? we ask each other continually."

"Yes, it is a bother. I'm sure I do not know what I should have done, if it had not been for Rachel. She used to sit, and sew, and plan, turn ideas and things inside out and upside down. I could do well enough after it was thought out."

"Philip helps us think," said Madge. "He is almost as good as a girl. I do believe I would rather have him in the kitchen than Nelly."

"And now tell us about the others. Your dear father?"

They described a little of what their life had been, and how every one had taken it. Hetty bustled in and out, putting forth one of her queer speeches now and then, that always seemed to fit in with the completeness of a laugh. And out of all the stir came the tempting dinner table, with its four plates instead of two.

"It was so good of you to come right here," said Miss Hetty. "I declare, I feel like the folks in fairy tales, when stray princes dropped down upon them. I wonder if every thing is nice enough."

They laughed heartily at that. Madge was her gay, olden self. Afterwards she insisted upon helping. She made such a charming picture, with her sleeves tucked up, and Miss Hetty's wide gingham apron half enveloping her. While she tripped around the kitchen, Jessie and Mrs. Rachel fell into a more sober talk.

"Is there any trouble?" she asked, taking the sweet face between her soft, wrinkled hands.

"Not much," returned Jessie, with a slight color.

"Mrs. Rachel," — after a long pause, and with a wistful deprecating smile, — "I wonder if one can be as good amid all the hurry, and trouble, and anxieties of poverty?"

"Why not, my dear?"

"Because there are so many things to occupy one's thoughts, so many duties and cares. When we were at Home Nook, it all seemed easy enough. There were nice long talks with mamma, church and Sunday school, time for reading and meditation, and visiting the poor, which kept it all fresh in one's mind.

"And now — you go to church, of course?"

"Not always," she answered, slowly. "It is often late in the morning, and we cannot all go out;" with a little rise of color, that showed, Jessie-like, the spirit of self-denial; "and there is seldom any service in the afternoon. We often spend our evenings in papa's room, singing — he likes it so much. Then we miss Mr. Kenneth. I can't seem to take root anywhere."

"That is just it," said Mrs. Rachel. "Every one needs some haven to which his bark can be moored."

"It is hard to make new friends."

"Have you tried?"

"Not very much. The nearest clergyman called upon us once, but he seemed stiff and cold. I suppose we cannot expect strangers to feel an interest in us immediately;" and Jessie sighed.

O, ministers of God, do you think your duty ends with prayers, and sermons, and visits to the sick and needy, who are thrust upon your notice, as it were? For there are some fine spirits vexed and hindered, whose inward light burns dimly for want of friendly contact, and who grope about in darkness, longing to love and to do, and yet finding no niche where their souls may expand. Who shall answer for all this at the last?

"And what else have you done, my dear?"

"Nothing. I seem to be floating about, wondering, and questioning God why all these things came upon us. I don't mean that I am impatient or especially doubtful, but I do not feel so much at rest."

"This is a trial of faith, Jessie. Some dark days come into all lives. Can you not hold fast by God, and believe that He who loved us and gave himself for us knows what is best? Our dim eyes cannot always see through the clouds, and our faith is sometimes slow to perceive."

"He doesn't seem as near to me as at dear old Home Nook. I sometimes feel myself drifting away, and long to clasp some strong support — a stay that will be sure and vital. Then the cares and work come pressing, and I almost lose my hold."

"Yes," Mrs. Rachel said, with a faint smile, "the cares of this world choke out the good seed, you know."

"And what must I do?"

She asked the question with simple earnestness, and the shy, soft eyes were downcast.

"I often think of the old scriptural injunction, 'Pray without ceasing.' It is only by keeping close to God that we are safe. And yet it seems to me that if you have thought so much of this, you have not strayed very far."

Madge and Miss Hetty emerged from the kitchen, the maid bright and glowing, pulling down her sleeves, and giving her shining ringlets a twist.

"I don't believe this little cubby ever was so gay before," declared Miss Hetty. "It's been a regular state dianer. You are so entertaining and hopeful! The storm has only gone over you, my dear, not wet you a bit, and you've come out in the blue sky, and the rainbow, and all the promise of things to be."

"I can't help feeling bright and happy. I suppose I ought to be sorrowful, and croon dismally over my lost estate; and yet I have a sort of presentiment that we shall all come back some day."

"I hope it will be in my time," added Mrs. Rachel, with a sweet smile.

Afterwards Madge set out for a ramble, but Jessie preferred to stay in and finish her talk. A pleasant one it was, gradually growing clearer and more comforting, sweetening and strengthening the life she had to brave, ennobling the petty duties, and touching them with an illuminating beam, giving a deeper meaning and sanctity to the trial that had been laid upon them all.

Madge did not return until evening, and Jessie was startled at finding their old friend, Charlie Westlake, her escort. The explanation was simple enough. Madge had been drinking tea with the Kenneths, and Charlie had dropped in through the course of the evening. For almost a year the girls had not seen him, as he was in college; but when he clasped Jessie's hand, she felt that he had not changed with their fallen fortunes.

A fair, frank face this of Charlie Westlake's, with the immaturity of twenty years that had left him still boyish and impulsive. Yet there was a latent nobleness in his broad brow and clear eyes, and the girlishly rounded chin was redeemed by the firm lines about the mouth. Life held no special meaning for him now, perhaps, but there was much that could be roused into ambition and strength.

But there was a curious, absorbed expression in Madge's face that her sister never remembered seeing there before, — a kind of introspection, as if she was glancing at some thought that richly satisfied, — and a strange depth and tremor in her voice. The inexplicable quiet was not pain, nor sadness, but a dreamy, restful peace.

"You're tired to death," said Miss Hetty, with kindest solicitude, after Mr. Westlake had taken his departure. "I've put the room all in order, and aired it until it is quite cool and pleasant; so now you must go to bed. You will be bright as a bird again in the morning."

Madge made no demur. With a tender good night,

both girls went lightly up the narrow stairs. The room was quaintly furnished, like the rest of the house, and the capacious high-post bedstead, with carved head-board, was mahogany, rich with the coloring of age, and the white adornments were in strong contrast.

"How odd!" Madge exclaimed; and then she lapsed into silence, and commenced her preparations slowly.

"Did you have a pleasant time?" Jessie asked.

"O, yes. I ventured on a few calls besides. Jessie, the loss of fortune does make a difference with some people."

"And that is why you are unhappy?" with the quick pang of apprehension.

"Unhappy!" and she laughed, softly, like the ripple of a brook blown about by summer winds. "Why, I am not unhappy."

The glowing eyes and flushed face attested this.

"But you are so — so strange!"

"Am I?" in a vague, careless way.

Jessie was puzzled. Then she and Madge read their chapter alternately, and knelt to say their prayers with their arms around each other's neck. Madge lingered a long while.

At last the light was out, and the rays of the young moon came stealing through the open window. Jessie could not sleep. The tranquillity of a few hours before had vanished, and though she was not troubled, a spell seemed to quiver through every nerve — a presentiment that was too deep for pleasure and too calm for pain.

A soft hand came stealing over her shoulder presently, and a low, tremulous voice said, —

"Jessie, are you asleep?"

"No," was the quiet answer.

"I want to tell you a secret — something odd and strange, and, O, so sweet!" with a lingering intonation. "Charlie Westlake loves me, and I love him. We are engaged."

“O, Madge!” in a tone of fright and pain. “And without mamma’s knowledge!”

“It is to be as she and papa say. I am sixteen, and he is twenty; so, of course, we will have some years of waiting. He has one more term in college, and will then study a profession. I don’t mind. It is very, very sweet, Jessie. And it all came from a talk about the fortune.”

Jessie was too much amazed to reply. So long indeed was the silence that Madge lapsed into blissful dreams; but Jessie watched until the moon had trailed her white glory across the sky and fallen asleep amid the golden stars.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOOKING AT THE FUTURE.

ALTHOUGH Jessie Ashburton's slumbers were in one sense refreshing, they were far from being tranquil. Snatches of strange and troubled dreams crossed her brain, and she awoke at early dawn, while the birds were still at their matins. Madge was sleeping peacefully, the fair face delicately flushed, and her own soft, vague smile parting the lips.

Had Madge actually confessed that wild and childish romance of the night before, or had it been a part of Jessie's fancy? It really seemed as if it could not be true, or, being true, might fail of possibility. Six months ago Jessie would hardly have doubted; but now all was so changed! And then they were both so young!

She rose, and sat a long while by the open window. She could see the outline of the Hudson through the spaces between clumps of trees and clusters of houses, and the Palisades rising on the opposite shore, blue and dusky in the morning light, with the fleecy clouds of rose and pearl crowning them. All was so serene, so full of peace, that Jessie forgot the mere worldly troubles, and lifted her heart to God. It seemed then as if all things were indeed possible; that out of this chaos of shadow, and doubt, and dim foreboding, the promise of beauty asked for might still be realized.

How long she lingered there drinking in heavenly peace and comfort she hardly knew. She heard the energetic Miss Hetty stirring about down stairs, and rejoined her presently, leaving Madge still asleep.

She and Miss Hetty had quite an entertaining time comparing housekeeping notes. Amid this the breakfast was prepared, and Mrs. Rachel assisted in her morning duties. Just at this moment Madge came flying down, bright and rosy, and the day was fairly begun.

Madge was quite like her olden self, it must be confessed. During the morning several of the neighbors came in to call upon them; and until the moment of starting, the sisters had not exchanged a word upon the subject that occupied the thoughts of both almost exclusively.

Miss Hetty proposed to walk to the station with them. "But this isn't half a visit," she said, in her brisk fashion. "I do not see why you couldn't come up and stay a week. Philip could do very well without you."

Jessie did not like to promise. The picture of Philip in solitude was not a satisfying one.

"Well, you know you're welcome any time, and not only you two, but any of the others. Remember to give my love to them all, and especially to your dear mamma. God bless you all, and watch over you."

Mrs. Rachel's farewell was very tender. She longed for some power to restore their fallen fortunes, and yet she felt that God knew best, and that in his infinite mercy he would make manifest the right path.

As they were crossing the platform, Charlie Westlake sauntered up from the opposite direction. He would have been loath to confess to any one but Madge that he had resolved to linger in the vicinity all the afternoon, in the hope of meeting them at last.

Jessie looked very grave. The kind of elder-sisterly feeling that she exercised over Madge seemed strong upon her, and yet she was helpless.

"This is real nice," Charlie exclaimed. "I am going down to the city, too; so I suppose you will give them into my charge, Miss Hetty, and I'll promise to see that they reach their destination safely."

His frank manner and winsome smile won Miss Hetty's heart. Besides, she was certain that he was too noble to forget his old friends. As for anything beyond the merest boyish friendship, that would never have entered her head.

"Yes, I am glad, Mr. Westlake," she replied, unsuspectingly. "They're precious enough to a good many yet."

Madge colored violently, and turned her head. Charlie had promised to see her again, it was true; but she had meant first to have a good long talk with Jessie.

However, there was no help for it. Charlie went for their tickets with a very mannish air. They said good by to Miss Hetty, and took their seats, Madge with a peculiar consciousness, as if she really had been guilty of deceit. And so they were all rather awkward, but the noise of the car was an apology for conversation.

At last they reached their own little cottage.

"Why, how pretty it is!" Charlie said, thankful there was something that he could talk about. "One does not often see anything like this in New York, unless it is on a grand scale. You don't miss the river either, though the Long Island hills are not much like our own Palisades."

Jessie found her key, and ushered him in. None of their bygone friends had yet seen their simple home. It *did* look pretty, and she was very glad.

Charlie Westlake could not resist the pleasure of making himself quite at ease. It had been so in the old Home Nook days. His own elegant home had always suffered by contrast. He liked the air, the geniality, the pleasant interchange of feeling that he had always found among the Ashburtons.

"Only one misses your mother out of it all," he said, with his bright smile.

Jessie hardly knew whether it was proper to leave the lovers for an explanation or not. Finally, generosity triumphed over prudence. She went ostensibly to open

the windows, and see that nothing had been disturbed. Then she cut some fresh flowers and filled the vases, for Philip would soon return.

She took one in her hand when she went back to the parlor. Madge was in tears, but they were not those of sorrow, for she smiled softly through them.

"Jessie," — and Charlie Westlake rose and came towards her, — "we both have something to tell you, though Madge says she confessed it in part last night. I have always loved her; it seems to me that you must know that. And when at college I first heard of your loss, I cannot tell how glad I was to think that I could make it up in part to Madge."

"But you are both so young!" Jessie replied, tremblingly, shrinking from the responsibility thus thrust upon her.

"Yes; but I believe I have loved Madge ever since she could walk; so it's no new thing. And I once heard Mrs. Ashburton say that she was married before she was seventeen;" and he smiled archly. "We do not contemplate anything like that, for I have another year in college, and my law studies besides. So Madge can take plenty of time to consider whether she likes me or not."

"But you may change," Jessie said, suddenly.

And just then it seemed quite impossible that one so young and inexperienced, exposed to the temptations and fascinations of society, could remain true of heart and purpose.

"You do not know me at all if you think that, Jessie. If we had all gone on the same as before, I might not have spoken yet a while; indeed, I never felt how near Madge was to me until the misfortunes came. And then I resolved that I would find you during vacation and tell my story. There are long years of waiting before us both, Jessie; but will you not let me be a brother to you in the meanwhile, and prove myself worthy of a place in your dear household?"

No one could distrust that noble and ingenuous face; and somehow his simple devotion almost brought the tears to Jessie's eyes.

"It is not for me to decide altogether;" and she smiled faintly. "Papa, mamma, and your own mother."

"I met Madge so entirely by accident yesterday that I spoke in an unguarded moment. I have explained to her that I shall see Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton as soon as possible, and plead my case. I think they will not prove severe in their decision."

"I fancy that — your mother — will not like it."

Jessie spoke with painful hesitation. She remembered too well the cool recognitions which Mrs. Westlake had bestowed upon her.

Madge started forward. Until this moment she had never considered Mrs. Westlake.

"I think mother will consent to whatever is important for my happiness — as this will be. Of course, the fortune being in my mother's right, I really have no claim upon it, you know; so I mean to work day and night until I am in a position to care for a wife," he said, proudly. "Do not anticipate trouble so far off;" and he tried to laugh lightly.

He knew still better than Jessie that there would be long and bitter opposition from this source. He had come home to find the Ashburtons dropped completely from his mother's list. The kind little messages which he had sent so often had never been delivered, and while he had been pleasing himself with various fond fancies, his mother believed that she had made herself understood with the Ashburtons. They had too much pride and delicacy to welcome him with the olden warmth when *she* had put such a distance between them.

The subject had not been a happy one between mother and son, yet she trusted to time to eradicate the boyish penchant. And here was his cousin May, an heiress, ready to be won in a year or two. It would be folly to throw one's self away in so foolish a fashion.

After the first warm talk about the Ashburtons, she had preserved a discreet silence, but been none the less watchful. That danger should come to him in such an unexpected moment she could hardly foresee.

And when he found in a five minutes' talk with Madge that the spirit of her family had been entirely misrepresented, his indignation brought about the climax that his mother had striven to avoid, well knowing her son's frank and chivalrous disposition. And so it had all been done — whether for weal or woe the future alone could tell.

Madge felt very proud of her young lover as he thus stated his determination. Being rather given to hasty romance, she looked forward to a little opposition at first; but they by their courage and devotion would soon overcome this. She believed in her heart that Mrs. Westlake really loved her; for what else had all the past petting and fondness meant? And then, because they were poor, the fact did not imply that they were to sink into commonplace and vulgarity.

Jessie was less hopeful. It seemed to her almost like a new trouble coming, before the past was well settled. Would mamma approve?"

"Come, thoughtful Jessie," Charlie said, gayly, "I am not going to have you look so sober over it. If Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton decide that Madge and I must be friends merely for the next three years, I shall not demur. I love her and hers too well to add any burden of care or perplexity to them."

Somehow she could not help liking and trusting him as always before.

The entrance of Philip at this juncture was a relief to all.

"My dear friend," he exclaimed, grasping Charlie's hand, "I am delighted to see you. So you have not forgotten old companions?"

"Not I. There are too many pleasant memories between us, Phil;" and Charlie colored in spite of himself.

"The girls have had you so long that I mean to take possession now. I want to hear how you came through — though I suppose it was with flying colors."

"About old Harvard! It was a fine Commencement. I couldn't help almost envying some of the fellows; but I shall climb to their height before another year ends. Dear Phil, it is too bad to have you out of the ranks"

"Only for a while, I hope. I think it will all come round right by and by. Perhaps I shall learn some good lesson by the waiting."

Leaving the two friends to talk over college times, Madge and Jessie went to prepare a simple supper. Madge's silence and restraint had ended. She could talk quite freely now, and yet her new-found happiness was so strange and sweet a thing that she stood almost in awe of it.

Jessie had no heart to chide or express the dim forebodings that would shadow her soul, even though tempered by hope. And then the meal was like a gala episode.

One thing gave her a great deal of comfort — Philip's first announcement had been about papa.

"He stood the journey splendidly, and really had quite an appetite for his supper. In spite of being tired, there was a bright look about his eyes this morning, and mamma is very much encouraged. The place will be delightful for them. I feel as if we could never be grateful enough to Dr. Conway for interesting himself so much."

"If he only could get well!"

"I think he will now. He may never be so strong again, but we will hope for the best."

That left the girls quite light-hearted. The meal was the gayest one they had known in a long while.

And some way Charlie managed to whisper that he should see Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton before long, and explain the whole matter to them, which pleased Jessie very much.

Philip was more than amazed when the secret was confided to him, and very incredulous.

"Fancy my falling in love!" he said, with a laugh.

"But Charlie only lacks a week or two of being twenty."

"Madge," began Phil, with a touch of earnestness, "there is a great deal of this work going in the world. Young men often look upon it as harmless flirting, and when they are ready to marry, break their word easily enough. Then, if the girl is made of finer and truer material, she has to suffer long and keenly."

"I wish you or Jessie would have some faith in Charlie;" and the tears stood in Madge's eyes.

"My dear little sister, I am thinking of your welfare. Life is likely to be hard enough with us, and we do not need to take up useless burdens. I am sorry it has happened, but I think mamma's clear and tender eyes will see the path that is likely to have the fewest thorns in it."

Madge cried herself to sleep that night. Her faith in Charlie Westlake was perfect, and it made her miserable to have the others misjudge him.

They had a very quiet household, Philip being away all day. By tacit consent, Madge's affairs were dropped for the present. The two girls were busy, at first, putting the house in order, and then came a rather lonesome time. Jessie decided that the days would be nice and long for sewing, and began to furbish up some dresses for the coming autumn, amusing Madge by repeating old Mrs. Deane's advice.

"You certainly have a genius for dress-making, Jessie, and it may prove a fortunate thing for us all. I wish I knew what my heritage was. I've been thinking over what Nelly said about music. Teaching it *is* genteel, though I don't like the word. One could do that, and still spend a good deal of time at home. I believe I shall take mine up again in good earnest, though I am afraid that I shall never prove a brilliant success."

The fear was not unfounded. While Madge possessed a clear, bird-like voice and a passionate regard for music, she had very little patience with the troublesome details. She was always adding a grace-note in the place of something she could not remember upon the instant, or her time was not quite correct. Perhaps she never tried in good earnest to overcome her waywardness in this respect.

Now she resolved to practise regularly, and it must be confessed kept strictly to her word, though she found it an immense hardship. Jessie smiled to herself over the persistency.

"Though I believe I would rather wash dishes and sweep the house," said Madge, laughingly. "A depraved taste, I am ready to admit."

The letters from mamma were full of encouragement. Mr. Ashburton improved daily, began to take short walks, and could drive without being dependent on others. Mrs. Ashburton hailed all these promises of amendment with the most devout gratitude.

One day a thick packet came for Madge. She had received one or two brief notes from Charlie Westlake, detailing his movements, as his mother had decided upon a somewhat extended summer tour. He would have given much for a few lines in return, but he had said that he would not ask the slightest favor until he had found an opportunity to explain all to her mother.

The warm blood mantled Madge's face as she read. Charlie Westlake had paid them a visit, taking them very much by surprise. Of course they were delighted to see him, and to hear from him a glowing description of the small tea-party which he appeared to have enjoyed so much, although Madge had furnished them with an account also.

And then came the important confession that he was to make for both. He had stated the case very frankly, admitting that in the beginning he might expect some opposition from his mother. He had pleaded his cause so

eloquently that Mr. Ashburton, with whom he was a great favorite, felt inclined to listen, though he could not promise much for the present. Finally, it was decided that if in the course of the next year his feelings should not have changed, they would take the engagement into consideration.

And then followed the tender counsel and loving care such as a mother only can give. She could not help but regret that this knowledge had come so early to Madge; yet there might be some hidden grace in it that their eyes were slow to perceive. Her darling must not be hasty or imprudent, and try daily to fit herself for any sphere of life in which her duty seemed to be most apparent.

"Dear mamma!" Madge said with tearful eyes. "Was ever anybody so sweet, and wise, and good? Why, I don't feel a bit disappointed, and it's nothing to bear, since she has faith in Charlie. Why, I could wait seven years, I know, and be happy all the while, with her to comfort me."

Philip looked a little grave over the decision, but made no comment.

Eleanor wrote regularly to mamma, but less frequently to the girls. She seemed to be enjoying herself very well, and announced that aunt Waltham had accepted an invitation for a fortnight in Boston; so she would not be home before the middle of September.

Jessie made up her household accounts in great triumph the last of August. For two months there had been a noticeable decrease in expenses. But then the little hoard had been drawn upon pretty severely already. Philip had insisted on Eleanor being provided with enough to render herself tolerably independent in case of an emergency, and with all the demand, there were but four hundred dollars left.

"Our coal is in," said Jessie, hopefully, "and some provisions for winter. Then there are no debts, and we have

enough for our little trip." For Philip had a week's holiday, and proposed to take the girls up to the Catskills when he went after their parents.

Two months had been a long separation. Only the urgency of the case, or rather, as Jessie felt, their poverty, could have so prolonged the absence. She was learning many grave lessons that were to stand her in good stead during some dark days yet to come.

The tour was delightful beyond description, for the two girls had never travelled very far from Home Nook. And then to be pressed to mamma's heart, to see papa looking much improved, if not quite like his olden self, and to feel that the fond family circle was united once more, though two dear faces were missed!

"God has been very good to us," Mrs. Ashburton said, as she stood in the twilight with the children. "Do we indeed realize what a friend we have in him?"

Jessie met her mother's eyes with a sweet smile.

Madge was thoughtful a moment, then said, with a bright flush, "I begin to think poverty quite endurable, mamma. I wonder if brave and noble deeds are not made more plain by it."

CHAPTER IX.

ELEANOR.

THEY were very glad to be at home once more, but life was to be taken up in earnest. The sweet holiday of youth had ended for them all.

"I feel as if I ought to be learning to do something useful," Madge said, impatiently.

"You must go to school regularly for the next year," her mother answered. "If it should be necessary for you to help by and by, you might become a teacher."

"Mamma, I never did and never can like that. I believe I should go crazy. I love children in a certain way, but I would rather dress and amuse, and perhaps take care of them, than to teach them. That will always be my abomination."

"But it is necessary to know a little more for yourself, if you are never called upon to impart it. You are hardly sixteen, and not as far advanced as Jessie. She proposes to study at home, and I think she will keep pace with you."

So Madge made her *entrée* at school quite different from the select classes at the Riverside Seminary. But Madge was democratic and social, and soon became a great favorite with the girls.

The grief of the absent Clement at the loss of Home Nook had been deep indeed. He could not understand why this sorrow should come upon them at a time when they appeared so peculiarly helpless.

"I would propose an immediate return," he wrote, "if I could see that it would be for the best. If I should

have my health, prosperity is quite certain. In eight or ten years I may make a fortune, — at least, enough to buy back Home Nook, — and render the remainder of life comfortable to you and my dear father. At home I should have to run the risk of getting established to my liking, and it would be at considerable present loss. In the mean while, remember that I shall always be ready to assist; and do not therefore keep me in ignorance of any want. But I shall never rest until Home Nook is ours once more."

"Dear Clement!" Philip said, in a voice touched with emotion. "He will do so much, while I seem quite helpless."

"No," returned Jessie; "if you take care of us now, it lifts that much of the burden from him."

Philip sighed. The reality was so different from one's dreams! and though it was possible for ant-hills and coral islands to be built grain by grain, a fortune was much more difficult to achieve.

September had nearly waned when Eleanor returned. She took them somewhat by surprise one pleasant afternoon. Jessie started back in amaze as she answered the door-bell. There stood Nelly and aunt Waltham.

"O, Nelly!"

The stately girl bent down and kissed her fair sister.

"My dear Jessie," exclaimed aunt Waltham graciously. "Are you all well? Why, you look as fresh and bright as a daisy."

Jessie ushered them into the simple parlor, and Mr. Ashburton clasped his long-absent daughter to his heart.

"Why, how much you have improved!" said Mrs. Waltham, glancing at her brother, while she clasped her sister-in-law's hand with great cordiality.

"I am glad to hear you say so;" and a flush of pleasure crossed his delicate face.

"I suppose you were hardly expecting us in this uncere

monious manner. We reached New York this morning, but I had some business on hand which required my immediate attention, and then I thought you would hardly need word to prepare yourselves. Nelly is looking wonderfully well—is she not?”

Aunt Waltham uttered this in a rapid breath, and sank down on the sofa in a flutter of lace and ribbons.

Eleanor colored under the scrutiny. One fond heart noted the change with a pang. She did look well, and there was not only a peculiar brightness about her, but something else as well. The simple, noble Eleanor had merged into a fashionable woman. There was a style and grace in every motion, a peculiar turn of the head, a soft accent of voice, and a power in the eyes, a kind of fire hardly veiled under the languor. What had worked this change—contact with the world alone, or had it some subtle, underlying chord?

“Of course you will stay,” said Jessie, with a half-nervous laugh. “Mamma, how negligent we are! The thought of our visitors has quite overwhelmed us! Come up stairs and take off your bonnet, aunt Waltham—Nelly.”

“If you take mine, Jessie, I shall be obliged. We shall favor you with our company at supper, but you must know that Nelly and I have set up housekeeping on our own account. We went to see a house this morning, and liked it so well that we have decided upon keeping it for the present.”

Eleanor and Jessie went up to the chamber they had once said should be hers. Jessie stood a little in awe of her elegant sister.

“It seems as if you had grown taller,” she said, merely to break the awkward pause. “And—did you have a nice time?”

“O, delightful! Aunt Waltham has been most kind and generous.”

"But about the house —"

"Aunt Waltham insisted upon it. A furnished house on Fifth Avenue, belonging to some friends of hers who have gone to Europe to-day, and they were anxious that she should take it."

"How very grand you will be!"

"Aunt Waltham thinks it better under the circumstances —"

Eleanor paused and flushed.

"I shall be glad for you to have any happiness or pleasure," said the sweet, tremulous voice.

Eleanor took off her stylish hat, with its long scarlet plume, and pulled out the glossy waves of her dark hair. There had been a time when she would have frowned on a proposal to call in the hair-dresser's art. But she had resigned herself to the hands of Pauline, her aunt's French maid.

"So you think papa quite recovered?" she said, rather absently. "And Philip —"

"He will be delighted to see you. Yes, the air at Catskill seemed to work wonders with papa. We can never be sufficiently thankful."

"Still, I do not suppose he will ever be well enough to go into business again. And it will be so hard to make another start. What does Clement say?"

Clement's letter was in mamma's "box of treasures." Jessie brought it for Eleanor's perusal.

"O, if he can be successful! If we ever should have Home Nook back again!"

"I hope so for papa's sake;" and Jessie's lip quivered.

"I hope so for all our sakes. You can hardly realize the difference it would make. When you and Madge grow into womanhood —"

"I do not think of that," returned Jessie, slowly.

"The world will force you to, then. It makes a wider difference than you are aware of, Jessie. And unless one

is quite willing to relinquish *all*, there must be many trials."

"We shall see so little of the world!"

Eleanor sighed. Jessie's fancies were ever a little wild. She had come to such plain, practical views, she thought.

Down stairs the conversation progressed rapidly.

"A house!" Mr. Ashburton had said. "What fancy is this?"

"I have taken a furnished house for a few months," Mrs. Waltham answered. "The exigencies of the case seemed to demand it."

"If you mean that Eleanor ought to have a better home than this," began Mr. Ashburton, much excited, when his sister interrupted him with,—

"My dear brother, pray be calm. I have some explanations to make that will place the matter in a proper light. I should have written to you, but one can never do justice to such a subject in a brief letter. In short, Eleanor is engaged, and I have resolved to do handsomely by the dear girl. I knew you would hardly want the excitement of a marriage here, and I have determined to take upon myself the attendant expenses. Indeed, you shall not say a word—it will be a pleasure to me, I assure you."

Mrs. Waltham uttered this in a rapid breath.

"Engaged!" echoed Mrs. Ashburton, in consternation.

"Why, is there anything so remarkable in that? Eleanor is a handsome and attractive girl, and quite old enough to marry."

"I must see the man who thus lays claim to my daughter's hand," said Mr. Ashburton, almost sharply.

"O, you will see him, of course. He is quite anxious to ask consent, and all that. I told Eleanor that I would smooth the way for them both. Why, you must remember the Copelands? An uncle of this Gerald Copeland used to be in some importing house. His parents are

dead, but he inherited quite a large fortune from them. It is a very nice match, I am sure, though Eleanor might easily have married a richer man."

"I must see him before I can decide. I, for one, am not ready to barter away my children."

"My dear brother, what a foolish fancy! When two young people have fallen in love with each other, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to be said against the gentleman, it will not take long to decide. Use your better judgment, I beg of you. Here you are, still a long way from perfect health, with two more girls on your hands, and Philip barely able to keep the house going! Girls do get married sooner or later, and you ought to be thankful to have her so well settled. I call it a very fortunate opportunity."

"I must have a talk with Eleanor."

"She is quite anxious, dear girl. She has been very charming this summer. But I always did say that Eleanor was the flower of the family; and I am delighted that it is in my power to do so well for her. The Winthrops fairly besieged me to take their house, for they dislike leaving it alone. Everything seemed to happen so nicely!"

Mrs. Waltham appeared to be in a glow of delight. Her very amiability roused Mrs. Ashburton to something like distrust. Rising, she excused herself for a few moments.

Could it be true? She went slowly up stairs, her heart in a strange tumult. How fast these events came upon her!

"Jessie," she said, quietly, "since you are housekeeper will you see if anything is needed, and send Madge for it when she comes home?"

Jessie obeyed the behest.

"My darling child!" and Mrs. Ashburton clasped her daughter to her heart. "Is it true — your aunt's story?"

“About my — my engagement?”

Although Eleanor hesitated, her voice was clear and untrembling, too steady for a girl in her first love-dream.

“My child, I ought not to have trusted you this whole summer with aunt Waltham. Her powers of persuasion are strong; her habits of looking at the world with most worldly eyes, and her sophistries are very dangerous to a young and inexperienced mind. As you know well, she places the fact of what is called a good marriage far above esteem and confidence, and that noble truth, as well as trust, which should be the basis of all such agreements.”

“Mamma,” Eleanor said, almost haughtily, “if I had not admired Gerald Copeland, I should not have allowed him the opportunity of speaking. I cannot see that the fact of his having some wealth should go against him. If we were back in the old place, we would hardly suspect an honorable young man of marrying me simply for a possible fortune; and have you not equal confidence in your own child?”

“I should have all confidence in you, Nelly, if I were convinced that you were following the dictates of your heart.”

Mrs. Ashburton tried to read her daughter’s eyes, but they were studiously averted.

“I never was an eager, romantic girl, as you well know. I am nearly twenty-one, and have not yet fallen in love, as the phrase goes. I have never met any man in whom I have become as deeply interested as Gerald Copeland. He is tender, chivalrous, delicate, and loves me truly. I told him the truth,—that we had lost our fortune and were poor,—and if I had cared little for him before, his devotion then must have won me. When you see him, you will be able to judge better.”

While uttering the latter part of the sentence, Eleanor’s voice had deepened to a certain enthusiasm, and a flush warmed her cheek.

"My child, do you love him? Answer me that one question. For to marry without the highest and truest regard is a deep and deadly sin against one's soul. Fortunes may fail, sickness and trouble may come and think how bitter the burden must be without love, which makes the grace of patience and sacrifice."

"I think it would be my nature to care much more for my husband than my lover," said Eleanor, steadily.

"And then are your tastes and beliefs, your thoughts and habits, likely to correspond? How can you judge in this brief while?"

"We have seen a good deal of each other; and then Gerald seemed to take aunt Waltham into his confidence immediately."

Or, had she attracted him? Mrs. Ashburton had always held her sister-in-law's manœuvring in extreme distrust.

"When did you first meet him?"

"In July."

Eleanor was a little ashamed to say—the very last of the month.

"Hardly three months. What can you know of his principles, whether he is to be trusted with so sacred a thing as a woman's life?"

"He came well recommended. O mamma!" she went on with sudden earnestness, clasping her slender hands, "our old, quiet life gave us small knowledge of the world. Why, there were girls who envied me every look, every attention, who used their arts and fascinations—and you can hardly believe how current, and almost necessary these are in society—to win him from my side. Can you not be sure that I held myself above so degrading a strife? He came to me in the face of all this, sought me out, loved me, and why should I not make some return? Is it so poor a thing to have a man's heart laid at your feet?"

She looked so beautiful, so purely proud, that her

mother could not help admitting the force of her attractions.

"If, when you see him, you still doubt his affection, or are unwilling to trust him, and I should feel convinced that my marriage would make you unhappy, I will relinquish it; though Heaven knows that our future looks bleak enough!"

Eleanor shivered, as if a wintry blast had passed over her, in anticipation.

"My darling, your happiness is all that any of us can desire."

Mrs. Ashburton turned away to hide her tears. She began to realize how far her child had been estranged from her. Only a year ago, their thoughts and tastes had been in unison, though Eleanor's was not a demonstrative nature. Yet how many hours of sweet and unalloyed happiness they had shared during their pleasant tour of the summer before! Now there was an impassable barrier, something more subtle than mere coldness.

"Aunt Waltham will wonder what has become of us," said Eleanor. "And papa will fancy that we are hatching a conspiracy."

"And I must see to my little housekeeper."

There was no lingering word of tenderness between them, no clasp of the hand or fond glance of the eye. Eleanor turned in her stately fashion, and Mrs. Ashburton felt positively awed by this queenly daughter.

Mrs. Waltham meanwhile had taken the opportunity of having a good plain talk, as she termed it, with her brother. She had made him feel his helplessness, the injury he had worked his family, and his utter inability to make any restoration. Not that she had been sharp or cross: there is a far more effective manner of carrying weight, of bruising the wounded heart into silence. Then she portrayed the advantage of this connection for Eleanor.

"The child is too shrinking and sensitive to brave the

ills of poverty. They would wear upon her health and spirits until she sank into a decline ; and then you would have another helpless, nervous invalid on your hands. I love her too well to see her wasting her young life in vain ; and since this fortunate chance has come to her, it would be folly to allow it to go by unimproved."

There are many times in life when one yields without being convinced. Mr. Ashburton felt that he could make no headway against his sister's rapid arguments. They spoke to each other in unknown tongues, as it were. He had not the strength to combat her worldly beliefs and prejudices, and so she imagined that she had conquered him, and was glowing and gracious.

The little supper might have been pronounced a success in truth. Jessie and her mother had made the best of their small means, and Madge cut the last of her darling flowers for bouquets.

I am not sure but that aunt Waltham's good humor inspired them all. She praised Jessie, and listened with flattering attention to the details of housekeeping, and even had no fault to find with Madge, which was a wonder.

Philip came in just before their departure. Aunt Waltham laughingly told him that she had laid claim to Eleanor, and that he must come and spend his first leisure evening with them.

"After we are settled, and rested up a little, you will see us frequently," she said.

They kissed Eleanor a fond good night, and saw her step into the waiting carriage.

"What is the meaning of it all ?" asked Philip, in surprise. "And how Nelly has changed !"

"I'm sure she is handsomer than ever," declared impulsive Madge.

"Yes — but — I don't know whether you noticed, only it seems to me that the old home look has gone out of her

face. She is proud and elegant, and has the air of a queen. Perhaps it is the polish of society. But what are they doing? Has aunt Waltham set up an establishment on her own account?"

"Come out and have some supper," said his mother, "and I will tell you. We had ours early on their account."

She paused a moment by the side of the lounge on which Mr. Ashburton was lying, and smoothed the thin hair from his pale forehead.

"I can spare you while I rest," he whispered. "We will have our talk afterwards."

The three younger ones listened in astonishment. Mrs. Ashburton hardly knew whether it was wise to confide in them thus early, and yet they must soon know the whole story.

"And so aunt Waltham means to marry Nelly in her own fashion, after the manner of society! Our Nelly, who used to be so sternly upright and honest! I used to think her like the pictures of some of the old saints, as pure and unswerving. Must it be, mother?"

"My dear Philip, there may be another side to the story. It is hardly fair to prejudge this Mr. Copeland, and it is possible that Eleanor may be strongly attracted towards him. I hardly believe she could resolve, upon a three months' acquaintance, to marry a man whom she did not like."

"Mother, there are some very bitter temptations to poverty, after all," said Philip, gravely, remembering Eleanor's shrinking distaste to their present surroundings.

"I cannot think any child of mine would barter the birthright of truth and honor for a mess of pottage," she replied.

"O, she must, she does love him," said Madge, warmly, for she experienced a strange, sudden thrill of sympathy with her elder sister. "Only, she is so — so different!" and

Madge flushed. "She never did talk much about herself, you know."

"But she *has* changed," persisted Philip. "She has the air of a haughty, fashionable woman; and what if her heart has already grown cold! For it seems to me that failing in any high and noble purpose, Eleanor will be very worldly indeed."

"We can only trust her to God," Mrs. Ashburton said, tremulously.

"And I wonder if we trust God enough," Jessie began, slowly. "I was thinking, while I was up at Hetty Bright's, that perhaps we were straying away. Nothing seems as it did at dear old Home Nook."

Philip sighed, and pushed back his chair.

"Of all bitter things in this world, the sin of marrying for money is the worst."

"But as mamma says, we must not judge Nelly too soon," spoke up fond Madge.

The two girls washed their dishes afterwards, and discussed the supper.

"I believe I really do like aunt Waltham," confessed Madge; "and somehow I cannot see how Nelly ever would get along with poverty. She doesn't seem at all adapted to it."

Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton had a long confidential talk in the quiet of their chamber. Yet could they stem the tide if Eleanor was resolved?

"If I could only read her heart," moaned the mother "If I could fathom her motives, and know that they were pure. Ah Heaven, why is it a sealed book to me?"

And thus we sometimes question God.

CHAPTER X.

DRIFTING WITH THE TIDE.

MRS. WALTHAM had resolved that nothing should interfere with her plans. It appeared to her so much more desirable that Eleanor should marry well before she was at all faded, or had lowered herself to any of the employments suitable for women.

She was a most skilful manager. At first she made Eleanor's sojourn at Newport simply delightful and free from embarrassment. That the young girl understood why she had been brought thither, and why she was treated with such consideration, was most true, though no word on the subject had passed aunt Waltham's lips.

For a month Eleanor's soul was in the wildest chaos, though no one would have suspected it. The beautiful face kept itself calm amid contending emotions, and the steady eyes never wavered, though the tides surged high within. Other women, as delicate and refined, looked upon matrimony as the great resource of their otherwise fruitless lives. Here were brilliant and apparently contented women who had not idealized marriage, but taken the best that opportunity brought them, or that they could wrest from the hands of fate. And though Eleanor's soul revolted at the thought of a mere mercenary bargain, it also shrank from the other distasteful life — poverty. Mrs. Waltham lost no chance of setting its ills before her.

In this state she met Gerald Copeland, a young man of six and twenty, rather fine looking, well educated, agreeable, and possessing a certain winsomeness that made him extremely entertaining to ladies. He liked Eleanor, and

drifted into something that he called a flirtation. He could not exactly remember how he had come to "make love to her," but it was after a peculiar talk with Mrs. Waltham, in which she declared that Eleanor was like a daughter to her; and after a brief mention of the family misfortunes — as she was quite confident that he had heard of them — she incidentally let slip the fact that all she possessed would eventually go to Eleanor.

Gerald Copeland considered seriously, and decided that he could not do better. So he glided on and on, Eleanor's reserve being very charming to him, until he had spoken.

Eleanor Ashburton gave a great, frightened gasp at this. There was nothing about him that positively displeased her, and much that attracted. Perhaps she would never be desperately in love.

"But I want you to know one thing," she said, hurriedly. "Our fortune has been swept away, and I am poor. If—"

Gerald Copeland would have been the last man to admit the faintest suspicion of fortune-hunting, though I doubt if he would have spoken but for Mrs. Waltham's assurance.

He answered in a most tender and chivalrous speech. Eleanor took her duty upon her sacredly. She meant to love this man, to study his comfort and pleasure, to be worthy of his devotion.

If she made a little sacrifice of herself, it was for the others, she said. She would have a pleasant home to which she could invite them; she could restore Jessie and Madge to somewhat of their olden position, and provide her father with many luxuries that he must necessarily miss in his narrow life. It would relieve Philip and Clement of a great burden in thus providing even partially for the rest. And so she exalted her deed to an act of heroism, thereby looking upon it with a peculiar complacency.

There was a tendency to the strict letter of the law in

Eleanor's nature, a rigid adherence to any mode of conduct that she determined in her own mind was right. And during the month of her engagement she fulfilled every duty so perfectly, that she convinced herself of a certain degree of affection.

I do not think she could have brought herself to the point of marrying a man whom she did not esteem, and who was not agreeable to her. Feeling that Gerald's heart was warmly enlisted in his suit, she would have considered it most dishonorable to draw back. And though she had dreaded the meeting with her parents, she felt, with aunt Waltham, that it could not take place too soon.

She leaned back in the carriage languidly after she had uttered her farewell.

"So that trouble is ended," exclaimed Mrs. Waltham. "You were over-sensitive about it, my dear Nelly. It is natural, to be sure, that parents should experience some hesitation at giving their children into the keeping of others; but your father takes a very reasonable view of the matter. They will be quite charmed with Mr. Copeland, I know."

Eleanor was not in a talkative mood. It rather jarred on her feelings to think that her lover must be apologized for by a third person.

She found a lovely bouquet and a brief note awaiting her, and retired to her room quite convinced that she did love Gerald Copeland.

Two days later, the carriage was sent for Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton. Mrs. Waltham and her niece had become quite domesticated in their new abode. Indeed, Eleanor felt much more at home amid this elegance than in the humble abode of her father. She was cheerful and at ease, and to Mr. Ashburton appeared really happy.

Before supper, Mr. Copeland made his appearance and was duly presented—a bright, genial fellow, who soon rendered himself agreeable to Mrs. Ashburton, and suc-

ceeded in disarming her prejudices, for it must be admitted that she had some.

However, Mrs. Waltham carried her away presently. "You like him," she began with a little exultation. "I knew you could not help it. His gayety is just what Eleanor needs, for she has a tendency to over-seriousness. He spoke to me to-day about the marriage."

"Not so soon! Why, I understood Eleanor that they had been engaged barely a month," exclaimed Mrs. Ashburton, in dismay.

"He has all an ardent lover's impatience. It is better, of course, that she should be married here, as there is an abundance of room, and it is more convenient on many accounts. I think they will go to Europe."

Was she to be shut out of her child's confidence in this matter of arrangements, to hear only at the last, when everything had been decided upon?

"I shall give Eleanor her bridal outfit. I am sure that I would make any sacrifice, cheerfully, for the dear girl's sake."

"I am not persuaded but that it would be better to have everything plainer and more in keeping with *our* station," suggested Mrs. Ashburton.

"It would be folly, since she is going to marry quite out of your station;" with the least emphasis in the world. "You know so little of these things, Margaret! Mr. Copeland's friends move among the first circles, and I certainly should not want to mortify him at such a time."

Mrs. Ashburton was silenced. She felt really broken in spirit, and there was still a slight misgiving concerning Eleanor, who accepted all the facts so calmly.

"I suppose it will be about the last of November. That will give them time to get to Paris by the New Year. Nelly will be sure to create a sensation. I should like to witness her triumphs."

And so Mrs. Waltham went on with her worldly com-

monplaces, until Mrs. Ashburton began to show signs of weariness. Not a moment could she find alone with her child, for when they returned to the drawing-room, the conference between the gentlemen was at an end, and the conversation took a general turn.

"You will come to-morrow?" Mrs. Ashburton said, with her good by. "Remember that we have hardly seen you."

"I feel that we ought to know more about this young Copeland before Eleanor's destiny is forever decided," Mr. Ashburton said to his wife when they were alone. "He was brought up by an uncle, it seems, from whom he has inherited a fortune; and so far his life has been a mere pleasure existence. He appears amiable and honorable, and I believe that he really loves Nelly; but still I am not content. I cannot imagine her making a merely fashionable woman. I used to fancy that she had such a strong, clear soul, and would need a higher, finer mind to mate with."

"I have a strange fear myself that I cannot shake off. Are we growing unjustly suspicious?"

"It is a hard trial, added to our losses. If she should be sacrificed!"

Mrs. Ashburton clasped her husband's hands in silence. Could they hinder?

They would soon have found fate too strong for them if they had tried. Aunt Waltham had everything her own way. Nelly came home, to be sure, and was tenderly gracious, but not even her mother could surmount the barrier between them. The younger members of the family espoused Mr. Copeland, and he was quite brotherly to Madge and Jessie. And so the wedding preparations went on, with the delightful tour in prospective. Many a girl envied Eleanor Ashburton. Indeed, the world appeared rather brilliant, seen through this glamour.

She had come to understand that her parents *did* look upon matters in a different light, in a less practical way.

For she had no trust in God's overruling providence. She would have been shocked had any one told her this, for she still kept to the outward semblance of her childhood's faith. But when she saw her father deprived of health and prosperity at one blow, and could find no mistake or omission in his life that seemed to call for so severe a punishment, she did consider the judgment unjust. As aunt Waltham said, they might sit and wait forever for good fortune; the only way to attain it would be by using the best materials at her command. And this marriage was one opening, she thought. It would seem to pave a way for the rest, or, if the worst came, if her father never should recover, she would have a home, a place of refuge for them all.

The question of marriage was not a purely selfish one with her. If it had been simply for personal ease and comfort, she might have seen the thin disguise, and been warned in time.

November drew nigh, ushered in by a fresh access of business and interest. The Copeland relatives—and there were some very stylish cousins—took up Eleanor with great warmth and fervor. The bridal outfit was purchased, some elegant presents sent in, and the affair promised to be very brilliant. Aunt Waltham was in her glory.

At last the important day arrived. Jessie and a handsome Miss Copeland were bridesmaids. The bride was stately and magnificent in her rich white silk and gossamer laces; there was a crowd to witness the ceremony, a throng of fashionable calls for the next two hours, hurried farewells, interspersed with tender kisses, and Eleanor Copeland bade adieu to the old life.

Philip, Jessie, Madge, and aunt Waltham went down to the wharf with the party, and watched until the steamer slipped out of her moorings. There was Nelly, pale and calm, with a strange, questioning wistfulness in her eyes. She would be back by another midsummer, of course. But, O, would they all be the same?

"It seems so hard!" sobbed tender-hearted Madge
"And if Nelly should not be happy —"

"Don't talk so senselessly," said aunt Waltham, sharply.
"Nelly has more wisdom than all the rest of you together."

Philip was silent. He could not help remembering the misgivings with which they had assented to this marriage. And yet Mr. Copeland was an attractive young man. A trifle gay, one and another had said; but young men of leisure and fashion rarely escape this reputation. What was it that had given them this slight, intangible fear?

Perhaps they all felt that he was not Nelly's equal in the higher intellectual qualities, and that she would soon weary of a purely fashionable and material life. And when the awakening came — what then?

Quite a number of guests accepted Mrs. Waltham's invitation to remain and dine with her, but Mr. Ashburton was too weary; so he and his wife returned home. Mrs. Waltham determined to make the most of her festivities, and entertain her friends handsomely, as a continuation of the bridal feast. Now and then a word of praise was dropped in her cup. "So generous to her brother's family! What would Miss Ashburton have done without such a friend?"

"I have always loved the dear girl," she made answer, complacently. "If my brother's mind had not been so shattered at the time of his misfortune, it would have been quite different with them all;" and she sighed amiably.

She fancied that she had performed a very noble action. It *did* impoverish her somewhat; and yet Eleanor would have been deeply humiliated had she known the many stratagems that had been used in her behalf. Mrs. Waltham had such a charming, winsome manner, that she not only persuaded people to her way of thinking, but actually made them believe certain plans their own, so that it rendered a non-fulfilment of them almost impossible.

After the guests had gone and the lights were out, she retired to her own room with a satisfied conscience.

"I have done the best I could for them," she said, "and now they must look out for themselves. Poverty will not make so much difference to Jessie and Madge."

The "children" had returned quite early. They found their father on the sofa, and their mother reading aloud to him.

"O, dear!" ejaculated Madge; "what a solemn feeling seems to haunt us all! as if it had been a funeral, rather than a happy wedding. Do you think, Nelly—"

There was a glitter of tears in the bright eyes, and the voice paused in a quiver.

"Nelly always looks the same," said Jessie, gravely. "She is quiet and composed, and I am sure she did not appear unhappy."

"Only there was something in her eyes just at the last—as if she longed to come back to us."

And then Madge fell into a reverie. What if it were she, instead? Ah! could any one be quite glad to go out of the old home-nest?

"We will never forget to pray for her welfare," said Mr. Ashburton; and certainly the petitions ascending that night from fond hearts were deeply imbued with love and fervor.

The tide swept them all back to common life again. The old, uneventful round. Philip at his store, Madge going to school, Jessie with her housewifely tasks, and Mr. Ashburton sometimes quite strong again, then feeble and depressed. Letters from ambitious Clement, full of hope and vigor; from Eleanor, who was seeing the old world with keenest pleasure and satisfaction. Always something about Gerald, his generosity and indulgence, his kind care and desire to make her happy.

Aunt Waltham had gone to New Orleans to spend the winter. One or two old friends came from Riverside to make them a visit, and now and then a good long letter from Mrs. Rachel Dormer to Jessie.

When the spring business began to open, Mr. Ashburton succeeded in obtaining a situation. His health was very much broken, and his faculties appeared to have suffered somewhat, especially memory, and the readiness that had once characterized him. But they were all thankful for this amendment.

Nelly did not come home at midsummer. They had spent most of the winter in Paris, and there were so many places yet to visit! So long as she appeared content, they did not feel inclined to perplex themselves or her with vain questions.

Charlie Westlake graduated with honors. He sent a newspaper account for Madge's perusal, which delighted her exceedingly. A few days after, a letter came to Mrs. Ashburton in the familiar hand. It was a delicate explanation of his absence, with all his boyish eagerness and quick sense of disappointment. His mother and cousin had attended the Commencement, and were wonderfully well pleased with his success. But they had also come prepared for their summer tour, which was to be through the Lakes, and as far west as Minnesota. He hoped to return by September, however.

They all went up to Catskill for a week, enjoying the change of air, and the wild, beautiful mountains. Jessie and Mrs. Ashburton spent a few days with Mrs. Downer and one or two other friends. It seemed as if nothing changed at Riverside, save the growing out of memory that one always experiences to some extent.

Madge waited and hoped. Her nature was so buoyant and her trust so perfect, that the few weeks' delay was as nothing to her, since she had her bright dreams for solace.

He dropped in one day when they were least expecting him, but he was welcomed warmly, nevertheless. It had become a rare pleasure to meet cordial old friends.

Madge glanced up at him, and remarked an inexplicable change. The year had done a great deal for him.

And yet this change was not merely the outgrowth of boyhood, though that had been marked. He was tall now, rather above the average height, and the old frank gayety was fast blossoming into steadfastness. The eyes had taken a deeper and more direct tone, the lines about the mouth grown into firmness. A face full of promise, one would have said, indicating a soul that would work its way up to grander heights. It seemed now as if a noble and honorable manhood stretched before him, bright with the sunshine of promise.

Something of this she understood in her girlish, wondering way, but there was a deeper mystery behind it all.

He pleaded very urgently for an engagement.

"I am sure you might trust me now, Mrs. Ashburton," he said, with his frank, impulsive daring. "Not once has Madge been out of my mind the whole year. And if I served seven years for her, it would be just the same."

"You are still so young!"

"But Madge is seventeen."

"I shall never change my mind, mamma, if you mean that," responded Madge, with a bright flush.

"It is not altogether that," was the grave answer. "If you are both true in soul, the fact of being simply friends a little longer will not injure your confidence in each other. Then Charlie still has much to do, and perhaps had better not take upon himself quite so engrossing a claim. But my greatest reason for all is, that I think Mrs. Westlake will not be pleased."

Madge and Charlie glanced at each other.

"But Madge used to be a great favorite with mother."

"Circumstances have changed," Mrs. Ashburton said, gravely.

"I know what you mean, dear Mrs. Ashburton;" and Charlie flushed warmly. "There is a great deal of honor paid to wealth in this world, even among the best of us. I do not mean to despise it, for it is the source of many

pleasures, much refinement, culture, and advantages that one cannot otherwise have. But a man, if he have any spirit or ambition, can make his way in the world, which I mean to do."

Madge rewarded this resolve with a bright smile.

"Mother cannot quite understand how one is able to retain the graces and refinements of a higher life, in contact with toil and the practice of economy. She has never known anything of it. And it would frighten her if she thought I meant to take up a poor man's life —"

"And marry a poor woman!" Mrs. Ashburton appended, in her sweetest tone. "Yet it seems to me the case rests just here. If I allowed you and Madge to enter into a secret engagement, your mother might say, with some show of reason, that we had unduly influenced you at the most susceptible period of your life. And unless you are willing to confess it, I think you had better wait. I have a mother's tender pride in not desiring to have Madge unjustly blamed."

Charlie was silent for several moments, but the wish and perplexity settled at last into a brave, resolute expression.

"You are right, Mrs. Ashburton," he returned, slowly. "I mean to study law, and I hope to distinguish myself; but it would not be just to mother to keep my other purpose from her. I shall dare all."

"Consider first. Suppose your mother should insist upon choosing between Madge and all further assistance from her?"

"O, it couldn't come to that. And I have a little money of my own; enough to help me through. But in everything I should keep to Madge, my darling."

The young girl met the eloquent eyes with a glance as fervent.

"I sincerely hope that your love will make no lasting breach between you and your mother. I should be sorry for Madge to go to any home where she was not warmly welcomed."

"The best way is to confess it at once. I think my mother will say that I am too immature to form so important an engagement, and beg me to wait. In that case, may I come occasionally as a friend?"

It was very hard to refuse the eager pleader, with Madge's beseeching eyes upon her.

"I can hardly deny you that," she answered, yet with a certain hesitation.

"Since nothing can take away from Madge the consciousness of my love, I will be content. I hope, in a brief while, to be able to settle the perplexities."

And thus the young lovers parted, in a manner not altogether satisfactory to either.

"But I think the tangle will be resolved by patient hearts and fingers," said Madge. "It may be the one lesson that I need."

Mrs. Ashburton sighed a little in secret. While under some circumstances she might have felt pleased at this preference — for they all liked Charlie Westlake — it seemed fraught with many perplexities at present. Was it quite fair and honorable to hold him even by this tacit bond, slight as it was? For Mrs. Westlake was a haughty woman, and would hardly welcome a daughter-in-law dowered by poverty.

But she took this case to the throne of grace, whither she bore all her burdens. God in his wisdom had allowed it to come to pass, and he would open some path to the sure and right termination.

Early in the autumn they were shocked by the tidings of aunt Waltham's sudden death. She had been complaining of some trifling ailments for a month or two, which had at last taken a serious turn, though no one had considered her so near her end. The body was brought home to be interred in Greenwood.

"The providences of God are strange indeed," said Mr. Ashburton. "That I should have lived through so much

and though a wreck, still be spared, and sister Waltham taken in the midst of health and energy!"

But Jessie crept closer to her father, and slipped her soft hand in his.

"We are all glad to have you," she murmured.

After aunt Waltham's burial, her will was read. Shortly after her brother's losses, she had invested her fortune in an annuity, which brought her in a handsome allowance, but, of course, ended with her. Besides this, she had about a thousand dollars, which, with an elegant set of diamonds and some beautiful laces, went to Eleanor, while her clothes were left to Madge and Jessie. But in this respect she had been very economical. As soon as a garment became *passée*, she disposed of it to some convenient second-hand dealer, and was rarely encumbered with a great stock.

The busy, scheming brain was now at rest. So earnest and untiring in her care for the enjoyment and opinion of this world — what had she done for the next? For what had she been fitting herself these long years? Jessie trembled a little at the solemn thoughts that would find their way into her soul.

Eleanor and Gerald had decided to spend the winter at Florence, and thither her small fortune was despatched, at her request. And towards spring they heard that a little daughter had been born to Eleanor.

They might have heard something else if they had mingled much in the fashionable world. That Gerald Copeland was rapidly dissipating his inheritance, and had become an habitual frequenter of gambling saloons, with all their continental excitements and allurements. Mamas who had courted him for their daughters openly pitied that poor Miss Ashburton, while they could not quite forgive her triumph.

But the Ashburtons guessed nothing of this in their quiet lives. Eleanor's letters had become a great treat to them.

Her description of places, people, and the treasures of art were wonderfully vivid and entertaining.

"It is almost like seeing it ourselves," said Madge. "After all, I fancy the right thing did happen to Nelly. She must enjoy that kind of elegant life so much, and we must admit that it *is* nice to be rich."

But Nelly's heart was never unveiled.

CHAPTER XL

AMONG THORNS.

THE Ashburtons began to consider themselves quite prosperous. Philip's salary had been raised, and this, with Mr. Ashburton's assistance, rendered them for the present independent of Clement. Madge proved a bright, quick scholar, and would graduate in another year. Jessie and her mother attended to the household, and found many pleasures and comforts in the homely every-day living.

"If Madge," or "if Charlie," they sometimes said to one another, pausing with a fluttering underbreath. For he had not found courage to confess, or circumstances had been against him. There was a journey to Charleston to see a relative, and some discussion as to where he should begin his law studies. Mrs. Westlake knew her strongest ally was temporizing. She would not let her son come to a full explanation.

From thence they went to Florida on his cousin's account. It was all very pleasant, and he with his youth could not help enjoying it. He wrote occasionally to Mrs. Ashburton, knowing that she could not refuse Madge a sight of the precious epistles, but he never asked for answers.

The rent of their house, which had been low in the beginning, was raised fifty dollars.

"It seems to me that we are paying all that we can afford," said Jessie.

"Well, you might look around a little," remarked Philip. "But small houses are fast becoming a rarity in the city and it is best not to give up this until we have one in view."

Very prudent advice they found it. After hunting houses pretty steadily for a fortnight, they relinquished the distasteful business.

"There is nothing like this to be had for four hundred even," said Jessie. "And to go in a house with a family —"

"No," interrupted Mrs. Ashburton. "I could not do that unless the necessity was urgent."

"And then the expense of moving!"

"Yes. It would cost us fifty dollars before we could get settled again."

So the house was taken for another year.

Then the firm in whose employ Philip had hoped to go on steadily, met with several heavy losses in quick succession, and was at last forced to succumb. Business was very dull. It was early in our national troubles, when men began to question each other with apprehensive eyes, not daring to put all their thoughts into words.

Poor Philip! The search was most disheartening. Days, weeks — two months at last.

"I am sorely tempted to go to the war," he said to Jessie, one evening. "The country has a claim first upon the young and strong."

"But to leave us!" faltered Jessie.

"Would it not be better than idling away my time? There are a dozen men for every place, and the country calls for help. My heart smites me every day, Jessie."

"But papa clings to you so, and it seems to me that he is hardly as strong as a year ago."

"Yet what am I to do?" and Philip sighed.

A double answer came: first a situation, with a salary somewhat higher than he had received before; and then a letter from Clement enclosing a draft.

A long, kind, brotherly epistle. Clement was not unmindful of the grand struggle going on in his beloved country.

"Since I cannot serve my native land, and you appear to be the prop of our once happy home, whose members will be left too defenceless and helpless by your absence, I send you a sum wherewith to purchase substitutes for us both. This appears only right and just, I think. Others are laying their lives upon the altar, and we whom circumstances prevent, should not be backward in doing our duty through some other channel. I feel as if I wanted to be represented, and you who are so precious to them all at home must remain, and send another to become your champion."

There was much more that touched Philip to the heart as he read.

"What a dear, noble fellow!" exclaimed Madge. "I am glad to have him think of that. And it does seem right."

"What are you thinking of, mamma?" asked Jessie, watching the fluttering lights in the fair face.

"I was rejoicing inwardly with Madge. At times I have felt a little afraid that Clement, in his earnest and almost impatient desire to recover our lost home, would lose sight of some of the higher duties of life. But to see him thus thoughtful of needs besides his own, is a great comfort to me."

"O, mamma! As if Clement could ever be anything but noble!" exclaimed Madge.

"My dear, there are temptations everywhere. Are we not all commanded to watch and pray?"

Philip's soul and conscience were at rest after he had obeyed Clement's bidding. And then he began to watch his father more narrowly than before. How the face and figure had changed! The shoulders were bent a little, the cheeks thin and rather sunken, the hair and beard fast turning silvery white. But there was something that he had not remarked before. A kind of hesitancy, coupled with an almost painful watchfulness, as if he were listening for a sound that he might not readily understand, or the

coming of a dreaded visitant. Had there been an unconfessed symptom of paralysis?

In this anxiety, Philip had recourse to Dr. Conway once more.

"He is considerably worn and shattered, but I see no cause for apprehension," was the doctor's verdict. "Truth to tell, he is not able to endure the fatigues of business. He needs a holiday."

"And he shall have it," said Philip, with a swelling heart.

He took Madge and Jessie into council. If, when the warm weather came, they could persuade both parents to take a pleasant trip somewhere among country scenes, where peace and rest forever brooded in the air, and every breath brought new life!

"It is too hard to have him work at all!" said Philip. "If he would be content to give up entirely!"

They pressed each other's hands in silence. Poverty was no romance with them, but a bitter, actual fact. They felt it most keenly for their father's sake. They were young, and could face it sturdily, bear all the deprivations, for they had not taken such firm root among the graces and appliances of wealth.

Philip considered a long while how best to broach the subject to his father. The idea of a two months' vacation might startle him; and then again, if the situation had to be filled—would he be willing to go?

These perplexities soon came to an end. The holiday was proffered without any asking, only it was final.

He came home early one March afternoon, his face more wan than ever, and the soft eyes full of despair. Jessie was alone. Madge had persuaded her mother into taking a ramble around the Park.

"O, papa! Are you ill?" and Jessie's tender arms were about him, her warm cheek against his.

"No, my darling."

There was a curious calmness in his tone, though he was trembling in every limb.

"But — you are home sooner than usual!"

"Yes."

There was a faint sinking of the lines about the mouth, a half-fearful expression as if some blow had been struck, and he apprehended another.

She stood looking at him, mutely questioning him with her fond eyes.

"I have been discharged, Jessie;" with a little cry, as if the pain went deep.

"O, papa! That is not so very hard to bear."

The comforting voice was low and untrembling, the scarlet lips parting to a half smile.

"That is not all, Jessie. There was a mistake — I don't know how I could have made it — I go over things so many times;" in a weary tone. "But Mr. Evans was angry. You can hardly understand, my darling, how it seems to have a man much younger, and your inferior in every way, a kind of coarse, grudging nature, glad to find fault on the slightest pretext, placed over you as master, and to bear petty sneers and pompous commands. And though I answered mildly, it was nothing against the torrent."

"Forget all about it, papa. Philip has been planning something — a pleasure, and this just comes in right."

"But you don't know" — clasping his thin fingers together — "you don't know all. That was this morning; and I have been trying ever since to find some employment. They think me old and incapable; I see it in every one's face."

His pale lips twitched convulsively, and a tear dropped on the carpet.

"You need a little rest; Philip said so. And then I think it will all come right. Dear papa, let us trust —"

"It is so hard when one is unfortunate."

“And that is just the time.”

“If there was no one—if I could be spared—but it seems as if the time had not quite come yet. I wanted Clement to be tolerably free of burdens for a few years, since he has taken the one high task upon himself.”

Something strange and awesome seemed to find entrance in Jessie’s brain. This **H**ome Nook, so dear and precious, was a kind of promised land to them here in the wilderness. They were all striving, and hoping, and praying—but what if God meant they should never possess it again? She grew cold with a painful apprehension. It was the first time she had ever thought of the improbability.

“Papa,” she said, in a low tone, “all we can do is to trust God. He never will forsake us.”

“True, my darling.”

And then Mr. Ashburton was silent. It *was* more difficult to trust in adversity. One could not help asking why one must be stricken so sorely,—rendered so helpless!

He made several efforts after this, but with no success. Business was very dull—at least, anything that he could do.

Philip gained consent to his plan. Some one recommended a quiet little sea-side place on Long Island, where board could be obtained at moderate terms. Thither Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton went, and were well pleased with their surroundings.

“But it seems as if I ought not to be a burden on my children,” he said to his wife. “I always meant to do so much for them.”

“And shall we refuse to let them do for us?”

“It does not appear right,”—in his slow, sad manner.

“We must thank God for these two noble boys, and leave the rest in his hands.”

Madge and Jessie missed the two familiar faces sorely; but both were brave; and they began to consider what manner of life lay before them.

"I believe I ought to make application for a situation," said Madge. "I never could endure the thought of teaching school; but Nelly used to consider it genteel, and I hardly know what else I could do. We are not both needed at home."

It was very true.

"And since my destiny appears to be decided, and in one in which there bids fair to be a good deal of waiting," with a kind of half-sad smile, "perhaps it would be as well to make myself useful."

"I am sorry to have you undertake anything you do not like."

"It may be a good discipline, perhaps. I find that I am quite prone to consult my own likes and dislikes. And if I knew just what would suit me! I run over the list of female employments, and find that some of the higher ones are altogether out of my reach. O, dear! Life is full of perplexities."

Poor Madge. The realities were rapidly crowding upon her.

But that afternoon, as she sat alone, puzzling her brains with many unanswerable questions, Jessie having gone out to do some errands, she was startled from her reverie by a ring at the door.

"O!" with a glad cry; and the next instant she was sobbing in her young lover's arms.

"My darling!" he cried, in alarm.

She raised her wet, blushing face with a touch of Eleanor's dignity, for Charlie Westlake was manlier than ever. How dared she give way to such weakness and folly!

"My dear girl, are you not going to ask me in?" with a little of the old gayety in his voice. "I thought I should surprise you, but I had not dreamed of so sad a greeting. The others —?"

"Are well," Madge hastened to say, shyly preceding her lover into the parlor.

"Did I startle you? I ought to have known."

"I should have cried in another moment anyhow. Your coming is only a lame excuse," and she tried to smile.

"I do not want to lose my bright little gypsy Madge, for we have a way before us that will require a good deal of patience and hope."

"Mine was foolishness," said Madge, resolutely.

"Was it? And are you all alone? O, what lovely roses! They are from Miss Jessie's estate, I know."

A choice bouquet stood on the centre-table, in the cool, pleasant-looking parlor. Jessie was a marvellous gardener. Everything she tended came straight to perfection.

"I am glad to find you alone, Madge, for various reasons," and the young lover's face grew a trifle graver. "I have a great deal to tell you, but first I must hear about your sorrow."

"I do not know as it ought to be dignified with such a high-sounding title," — and the girl smiled again.

"But there was some pain in it, or there would have been no tears. Am I not your nearest friend? — nay, more than a friend?"

She turned partly away. The sympathy was too dangerously sweet.

"What was the trouble?" in a low, persuasive voice.

"Not worth the telling."

"Only that I have a right to know."

There was a little authority in his voice. Insensibly they were coming to that second estate where soul speaks to soul — the power on a man's side, the obedience on a woman's.

"Was it about your father?"

"Partly."

And presently it all came out. The hundred little fears shadowing their path, the question that had become so important with her, — what she should do, and how she should do it.

"School teaching does appear to be about the only resource of an educated woman, unless she has a special genius. And it does keep one fresh, up to a certain mark, in acquirements. But, my darling, I am so sorry to see you compelled to enter the arena of toil and strife. If I could take you now —"

"Don't," she said, as if a little pained. "You know we promised to abide by mamma's decision."

"And I have hardly kept my promise. Nay, Madge," with a grave smile, "wait until you hear;" for she was just ready to speak. "I have confessed all to my mother."

"O!" in a relieved tone.

"Yes, at last. I think truly that we have been trying to wear out each other's patience. As if she suspected, she would not let me talk. But coming home, I had to make some decision."

"And she disapproves?" Madge cried, with the quick unreason of youth.

"I will not deceive you, my dear brave girl. She affects to consider it merely a boyish fancy. I think the loss of fortune does make some difference with her, Madge, but I do believe that when she comes to understand this as the great faith of my life, the one crown of my manhood, she will be won into consenting. And since we should have to wait in any event —"

"I don't mind the waiting," Madge said, hurriedly.

"I told mother that hitherto we had been friends only, but henceforward it would be an engagement. She was quite anxious for me to wait until my return, but finally she assented. O, Madge! why do you look so grave? Surely this is not bad news."

"Are you quite sure you will never repent? I feel as if—I ought to give it up. We shall never be rich again, as we once were, and I should be most sorry to enter any family where I was not welcome. I see all these things in a so much clearer light now."

"There is another course. I thought if mother and I came to any open controversy, I should take it — that is, to give up my plans, accept a situation somewhere, and marry. Nay, you need not turn so pale; I was very resolute."

"You shall not give up your hopes for me," she answered decisively.

"This is my mother's plan. I think it does deserve some consideration. It was her pet project to go abroad as soon as I had graduated. Now the doctor has recommended it for my cousin, who is in delicate health. They both want me, and perhaps need me for a protector!"

"And you are going?"

Madge gave a gasp. To be left alone as it were, in this time of all!

"My darling, it is as you decide. I could go at my law studies immediately, and be near you; or, as I said before, I can take some position that will enable me to marry presently. If I go, it is with the understanding that I am engaged to you."

"O!" said Madge, "everything has a dark and troubled side. I wonder if it was for the best? I was so happy that day, so thoughtless; but what seemed simple and natural then, has grown complicated, until one hardly dares move in the matter."

She shrank back a little as she uttered this. Life had become so much wider and more sacred in these years.

"I do believe it *is* for the best. It does not seem as if God could allow two persons to love one another so dearly, and not have it come to its highest joy some time. We are young and strong, and I feel as if there was a long life before us. Yet, my darling, I shall do nothing without your consent."

Madge was trying to bridge over the commonplace and the heroic. It was so much easier to think of sacrifices

than to make them. If mamma were only here to find the right way out of the tangle!"

"I think you ought to go," she said, at length, choking down a little cry in her throat.

"I will tell you how it appears to me. It is a long-cherished plan of mother's; she has talked of it ever since I can remember; and as she consents to our engagement on that condition, it seems ungrateful to refuse."

"O!" and Madge brightened. "Then she *does* consent?"

"If I keep my mind;" and he smiled so assured of his own love. "It will only be a year or two, and we can correspond."

"It is not so bad after all;" and a rift of sunshine illumined the sweet face.

"We are to go in June, so there can be some blessed weeks, my darling. We will keep them for remembrances, and look forward to the precious re-union. O, Madge, you never will doubt me!"

"Doubt you? Why, you do not understand — this love is my very life! Perhaps being poor, and having fewer resources, renders it a more sacred thing to me, but I never could — love any one again;" and her lip quivered.

He caught her in his arms and kissed the sweet, flushed face in a transport of profound affection.

"I am going to see Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton to-morrow. I want our affairs placed on a firm basis, with the privilege of considering you mine, and corresponding with you. We are old enough now to know our own minds."

Jessie returned at this juncture, and by degrees Madge came out of the spell that seemed to have overwhelmed her. Yet whether she was most sorry or most glad, it would have been hard to tell.

True to his word, Charlie Westlake saw Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton the next day. His straightforward, earnest

manner pleased them both. That he was sincere and resolute, they could not for a moment doubt, and to refuse to sanction the engagement now seemed cruel.

"And yet our daughters are not marrying under happy auspices," said Mr. Ashburton, sadly.

"This may prove brighter in the end. I am sorry that it happened, but since neither he nor Madge change their minds, there is no excuse for breaking the claim. Mrs. Westlake may feel less bitter and disappointed as the years go on; and since we have to walk blindfold at every step, we will endeavor to bear the burdens sent upon us, trusting to see light at last."

"O, for your blessed faith, my wife! For somehow the way is dark, and I seem to wander."

Some quiet tears came to Mrs. Ashburton's eyes. Of late her husband had grown very much depressed, more so than during their first sharp losses.

Charlie Westlake had softened the truth in some particulars, and withheld one fact, that might, perhaps, have thrown a little light upon later events. Yet he did it from a tender and honest humility. How could he confess that his mother had declared his cousin May's life was centred in her love for him? He fancied if May's penchant were worn out by mere cousinly kindness, or if she should be attracted elsewhere during their tour, Mrs. Westlake would consent the more readily to receive Madge as a daughter. Then his mother's almost kind compliance to his wishes softened in his mind her first bitter opposition, and he was too loyal a son to say aught more than the circumstances required.

To Madge, after the first excitement was over, there came a bright holiday indeed. Because the period was so brief, Charlie felt disposed to make the most of it. He brought the girls flowers, he persuaded Philip to "beg off," and take two or three delightful drives with them, and then there were dainty little suppers that were like Jessie's own self.

For this young lover seemed to add one to the family. His coming never made any break. Jessie sat and sewed while they discoursed of future plans, for nothing concerning Madge was a secret.

"I shall hunt up your sister," he said, "and maybe bring her home with me. You never would believe," with a gay smile, "that I was always half afraid of Miss Ashburton."

"Poor Nelly," rejoined Madge. "How glad we should be to see her!"

They always spoke of her in this fashion now. Her letters had grown gradually grave—there was less travelling about, fewer pleasures, it seemed, but always baby Margaret. Had the coming of the little one rendered Eleanor so serious, or was the glamour of life slowly fading away? She said nothing of a return, but still she uttered no complaint of loneliness, lack of tender care, or any sorrow. Yet sometimes they feared that she was not happy.

"O, if you will find her!" Jessie replied. "And if she would come back!"

So they freighted him with dozens of loving messages. Every day the year of separation appeared to grow shorter. There would be all the letters, with no restriction upon them, the joy of a return, and then the working present stretching smooth and level, so much to be done, so much to be gained, and home and love at the end!

Ah! how many bright dreams have blossomed on this wise and faded! When the sheaves are gathered at last, out of more than one will drop a withered flower, and God knowing the many tears that fell over it, may set to bloom in fairer fields.

At last came the good by, spoken amid quivering sobs. How hard it was! And in this pang the year stretched out again. All that had gone before was child's play; but

Now Madge Ashburton felt that she loved with a woman's love, and to her deeper nature any pang would be doubly bitter.

Jessie took her in her arms and kissed her, for Jessie could always comfort.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE SHADOW.

It was a cool day, late in August, with a wind blowing up from the sea. The very air had a salt, suggestive smell as it went moaning through the streets, a whisper of storm, and danger, and wreck. Overhead, the sky was gray and lowering; a cheerless prospect indeed.

Madge had made a handful of fire in the grate. Again they were watching for the travellers to return home.

It looked bright enough within, and the pungent fragrance of heliotrope gave a summer flavor to the air. Madge had brought out some gay wools, and was crocheting; Jessie had a trifle of simple sewing in her hands, and both were watching. They had grown strangely silent in these few weeks.

Presently they started at the sound of carriage wheels. There they were, mamma, papa, and Philip.

The first greeting was in the hall. Mr. Ashburton came in, leaning on his son's arm. In some respects he had improved. He was not so thin, and the deathly pallor had given place to a more healthy color. Yet Jessie remarked that strange listening, as if to catch the faintest sound, and the unusual habit of putting his hand before him, as if he was not quite certain of the next step. What was this wavering and hesitation? — weakness?

She ran out to the little kitchen, and made the tea. The table was in neatest array. She meant it should be a kind of welcome feast, and had indulged in a few luxuries. Then, smiling to herself, she summoned the household.

There was some pleasant talk of the summer's enjoy-

ment, and yet a strange awe seemed to have fallen over them, betrayed in the low tones and frequent pauses. Jessie glanced at them all with startled eyes.

Madge was passing something to her father and answering Philip at the same time. Mr. Ashburton stretched out his thin fingers uncertainly, and his eyes appeared to wander. Jessie caught them just in range of the lamp. The pupils seemed to move slowly in a dim sea.

"Yes," he said, with an air of relief, helping himself. "Thank you, my dear."

Jessie glanced at her mother in a dumb, white terror. Her very throat was constricted by a spasm of anguish. O, could her terrible suspicion be true?

Mrs. Ashburton answered her with a pathetic, entreating look. For an instant, Jessie felt tempted to cry out in despair. Was there no end to the burdens, but must *all* the waves and storms sweep over them?

They rose presently, and went back to the cheerful parlor. Madge roused into a flash of olden gayety. Jessie caught her mother's hand, and smothered a little cry.

"He does not know;" in a breathless whisper.

"I think he is fighting against it. He has not been so bad; at least everything here is quite new, and it shows more."

"O, mamma!"

Mr. Ashburton had stumbled over a chair.

"How awkward! Jessie, my dear, I like a good deal of light, and the fire alone will not suffice for old eyes."

"Why, here is the lamp!" said Madge, turning to the low burner that stood on the centre-table.

He seemed to listen. Standing there, he looked such a pale, shattered wreck, the color gone out of his cheek, and his lip quivering. And then he turned wrongly. The child clasped him with her outstretched arms.

"O, papa!" with a half-strangled and pathetic wail, each rapid pulse throbbing with a new pang.

"God help me! I believe I am going blind!"

Madge led him to a seat, as if he had been a child. Jessie tried vainly to choke her sob before it rose to her lips.

"My dear ones," Mrs. Ashburton said, like an angel it seemed to them in the midst of their passionate grief, "God still careth for us."

"O, *does* he, mamma?" was Madge's vehement question. "Then why did he send this? Did not poor papa have enough to endure in his losses and his ill health? It is so very, very hard!"

"He will help us bear it. He has promised."

"But if He is so strong and all-powerful, and cares for us when we suffer, why could He not have helped it? I don't understand —"

"My darling," in a tremulous voice, that came over waves of grief, "none of us do. We should be all-wise if we did — sufficient for ourselves."

"Papa!" Jessie found her father's face half hidden on the pillow, and kissed it amid tears. The soft, true arms encircled him, but ah! they could not shut out that terrible knowledge.

He raised his head at length, and the frail figure seemed to sway to and fro in its strong passion, its bitter sense of loss.

"My children," he exclaimed, "the hand of God is laid heavily upon me. I meant, years ago, to make your young lives bright with choicest blessings; but instead I have added griefs and burdens. I am a poor, helpless, blind old man. All I ask now is, that Heaven will pity me a little, and take me to my final rest. It cannot come too soon."

No, fearful as this was, death and separation would bring still keener anguish. They clustered about him; he felt the hands so gentle, the hands so strong, and let the silence pass unquestioned, knowing well what was in each heart.

The business of life must go on in spite of sorrow. Perhaps it is as well. Brooding over loss and pain can but deepen the intensity, and it is God's will that we should see a golden edge to the cloud that overshadows us. For, behind it, is his infinite glory.

The Ashburtons took up their duties the next morning with brave, sad hearts. Jessie, Madge, and Philip breakfasted together.

"Perhaps something can be done," said Philip, hopefully. "There are many successful operations."

"I think it has been coming on a long while," remarked Jessie. "But mamma says he has been so sensitive all summer to the least allusion concerning his sight, that she never dared breathe a suspicion."

"I mean to send up Dr. Conway."

"Not yet," answered Jessie. "Let him recover a little from the shock."

"Everything in the shape of misfortune happens to us," said Madge. "I wonder what will go next."

They thought of Clement, their tower of earthly strength.

"It will be sad news for him," said Philip. "Ah, how happy we were when Clement went away!"

A few days afterward Dr. Conway called. Mr. Ashburton was extremely dispirited, but yielded to the examination without a word. After all, what did it matter? Life must soon be over with him, he thought. A little longer carrying about this heavy burden, and then he would lay it down thankfully. The end could not come too soon.

"It is a sad affair," the doctor exclaimed, with unwonted tenderness. "It would have been better if you had not used your eyes so rigorously last year. You were too weak in brain and nerve. And this is cataract."

"I did not like the way he took it," Dr. Conway said to Philip afterwards. "You must all cheer him up,

and not let him lose his strength. The film is going very rapidly over one eye, and the other is a good deal affected ; but perhaps in a year or two he will be ready for an operation."

"Thank you," Philip answered with a gasp.

"Your brother is prospering — is he not, Ashburton ?"

"Yes," was the quiet reply.

"Intends to make a fortune, and then return, I suppose."

"He hopes to ;" and Philip gave a faint smile.

"You must all keep heart. When matters touch the worst point, they begin to mend. You are young and brave."

"I shall do my best."

It seemed to them at times as if all comfort was wearisome. Profound griefs and passions seek solitude naturally, and they had fallen out of the old circle, drifted so far, indeed, that the world had begun to forget them, and new voices, even in sympathy, sounded strange.

Madge started with much energy to take her place in the ranks. It was not as pleasant as the romance concerning work. For though she preferred her application, and entered the normal school as a pupil, nothing seemed to come of it. Then she answered two or three advertisements for a daily governess, but in every case she was too young.

"It is hard not to find anything to do when one is willing to work," she said, tearfully. "If I could meet with something else — indeed, I have half a mind to take in dress-making."

Jessie smiled. "I am afraid you have not much genius for that."

"No. And then, I do not like sewing. Besides —"

Madge did not finish her sentence. There was a fine chord of sensitiveness in it that she could not quite explain, even to Jessie. It was not only herself that she must think of, but Mrs. Westlake's future daughter-in-law.

To be lowered in the social scale would be worse than the burden of poverty.

"Though I do not see why all employments are not equally honorable," she continued, after a long pause.

"Why? are they not?" and Jessie glanced up in surprise.

"Did I utter a heresy? Well, I have been studying the subject of late. If I could write a book or paint a picture, it would not be considered derogatory to any position. If we should attain to any prosperity in the future, that would be so much of a triumph to me; but many other employments might be mentioned to my disfavor. Yet, in both cases, my motive would be to earn money."

"It does not seem right to me to condemn any person who has labored honorably and faithfully," Jessie returned, with a thoughtful air. "Only, I think, some employments presuppose education and refinement, and others do not. Is not that the true dividing-line?"

"But why not make the refinement centre in the person, instead of the business?"

There was a puzzled look in the young face. It was a grave question that she could not seem to simplify nor answer.

"I think it does," Jessie said, slowly.

"But the reputation of it surely does not. You remember how Nelly once scouted my going in a store. And if I did that, or sewed, or took up any of the minor occupations, somebody would remember it with a little sneer. I suppose, when we lived at dear old Home Nook we did not think of being intimate friends with our dress-maker, or any of the people who worked for us."

"Yet we could always be kind and polite."

"We were. It never was mamma's nature to be haughty to any one. But Nelly, you know, always held herself regally above such associations. She used to be troubled about the attention you paid to poor people."

Jessie smiled gravely.

"Poverty and pride never did agree," Madge went on with something of the old brightness. "Yet I do not feel proud—for myself. It seems to me that it would be wonderfully entertaining to find a place as saleswoman in a millinery store. I should like it a hundred times better than teaching school. But I am afraid that even Charlie would not approve, and Mrs. Westlake would consider me irremediably disgraced. Yet I should be just as good, just as pure-minded, just as refined, and, it seems to me, equally worthy of every one's regard."

"And all right-minded persons would think so," responded Jessie warmly.

"May be I am looking at matters with over critical eyes; but the world seems hard and unjust to me, and you always have to be keeping up small shams when the truth would be so much more comfortable. Only all these outside events and little slights prick and pain you, until it appears as if there was not one invulnerable spot."

Jessie remembered the day Mrs. Westlake and her niece passed her, they in their elegant carriage, and she in the dawn of family misfortunes. And it seemed a rather sad and uncomfortable thing that Charlie had spoken, sweet as it was for Madge to have the love.

"It is a tangled and knotty problem," she made answer, softly. "I do not know that I blame rich people for desiring to shut out the uncultured and commonplace, with which they can have so little sympathy and no enjoyment, even if it does exclude the poor who could be their companions in point of intellect and education."

"So, it is wealth, after all."

"But there *are* some noble exceptions."

"Jessie," said Madge, after a long pause, during which her eyes slowly filled with tears, "it must always be a great comfort to you and mamma to think that while you were prosperous you tried to make others happy, and

shared your good fortune with them. And if we had some kind friend now —”

“We are going through dark days, my darling; and yet it seems as if there was something to hope for in the end.”

“I believe I am a coward! I sometimes feel like crying out with the Psalmist, ‘Hide me until these storms are overpast,’ instead of fighting my way through. It is well that men are seldom perplexed with the thought of what is respectable or genteel!”

Poor Madge! The way did indeed seem full of thorns. And yet she had fancied that her regret for the lost wealth would be less than that of the others. She had been anxious to come to the time when she might assist in not only bearing the burden of cares, but in making them lighter. And now why should she shrink away weakly?

Philip and Mrs. Ashburton gave their verdict in favor of the school.

“It will keep you in a kind of intellectual discipline,” her mother said. “You will not only remember your present acquirements, but make some further improvement, I hope. And there ought to be a pleasure in performing any duty well.”

“But I feel as if I had no taste for it,” still complained the child, for child she was.

Philip was quite urgent. It did wound his pride a little — that ultra-sensitiveness of a refined young man, in regard to his sisters — that Madge should be compelled to take her place among the workers. But Jessie was more efficient at home, and her sweet thoughtfulness was just what Mr. Ashburton needed in his hours of despondency. Madge could best be spared — indeed, her assistance was not required in the management of household affairs.

After waiting until she became almost discouraged, Madge at length received an appointment. To be sure the salary was not very large, — three hundred and fifty

the first year, — yet it looked like quite a little fortune to her, and she went at her work with a really thankful heart.

And yet, as she had said, it was not much to her taste. She had an extravagant fondness for pretty, bright, well-kept children, who needed only to be entertained with games, stories, or music; but to be held responsible for their intellectual well-being, to be patient with stupidity, disobedience, deceit, and the many wayward moods of the little ones, taxed every nerve to the farthest verge of endurance.

Yet there were some pleasures to her life. The happiness it gave her to be able to contribute her mite to the household was deep and fervent. Some luxury for papa, a tiny cluster of flowers for Jessie, or any simple gift, was an exquisite joy to her, as springing from the toil to which she bent her restless soul; and then Charlie Westlake's letters cheered her immeasurably. True, Eleanor had gone over the same route, but everything was new seen through his eyes. There was gay Paris with its throngs of people, among whom Mrs. Westlake found many friends, and May Rossiter hosts of admirers; indeed, her pure blonde beauty made her quite the sensation of the winter. There were palaces, libraries, pictures, and rare old historical haunts to examine; and for diversion, drives, dinner-parties, skating, in which Charlie distinguished himself, and the many varieties of Parisian life. He possessed very vivid and accurate powers of description, and the frequent letters were a real treat to them all in their quiet life.

The summer was to be spent in Switzerland. And there were the capitals of Germany, Vienna, Rome, and all the British dominions unexplored.

"Though I want to save something to visit for the first time with you," he wrote, "and if it is possible I shall not exceed my year. Yet I find a little time to study, in the

hope of not having quite so much to make up when I return."

And then the spring came. In spite of hard times and general depression, rents, it seemed, were continually on the advance. This season another fifty dollars was added. Madge and Jessie went through with the same routine of house-hunting, with the success of the year before. There was nothing cheaper for a small family, unless one took some inconvenient rooms in a house with several other families; and now this appeared quite impossible.

Mr. Ashburton's blindness increased slowly but surely; yet his general health appeared to improve. He became more cheerful, as one does occasionally under an inevitable burden. He could find his way around alone, though Mrs. Ashburton or Jessie generally accompanied him in his walks. And as the pleasant weather came on, he used to sit in the old arbor, where the soft sunshine seemed sifting grains of gold on his fast whitening hair. Looking at him thus, it appeared to Jessie that he was already crowned.

They were all glad when Madge's vacation came. The poor child had lost the glow and brightness of her childhood, and the careless, impulsive manner was softening into a gravity so tender that it was almost sad. Now she had a thin, worn look.

"But then, you see, I am growing quite slender," she said, with a touch of the old gayety that rarely flashed out. "Aunt Waltham always insisted that I would be stout, and have no figure at all. How she would be surprised!"

For Madge had expanded into tall and graceful womanhood — quite outgrown Jessie, who would always be a wayside violet, with her shady eyes and hair.

She was rather jubilant now, having been promoted and her salary raised to five hundred for the coming year.

"It seems to me that Madge ought to take a little

journey somewhere," Philip said, rather anxiously. "She betrays the hard work of the year."

"I only need a little rest and quiet, and I can have it here with mamma and Jessie. If I went away, I should want to take them all along."

"You can hardly realize the bliss of this perfect repose," she remarked to Jessie afterwards; "not to have your eyes everywhere in a moment, not to be thinking endlessly what you must do with this child and that, how you can infuse ambition into the dullest brain, memory into the careless, govern your little world, and at the same time govern yourself."

"I am so thankful to have you come to the rest. Now you must be indulged to the utmost."

"But not enough to make me weak for the years to come."

"I think you grow stronger, mentally."

"Do you? I am glad if any one finds any improvement in me, for sometimes I begin to fancy myself destitute of any grace or virtue. Jessie, how hard it is to bear the petty trials of life! A great sorrow or a great sacrifice seems to bring with it the necessary courage and endurance, but for these little things there is—nothing!"

"Yes, God's grace," replied the soft voice.

"I sometimes wonder if I have any of it. I don't suppose I should ever cheat or deceive, or commit any great crime, because all those things are distasteful to me, and fill my soul with abhorrence. So that quality is merely a negative virtue. But the little things I rebel against continually."

"Yet you have grown so much less demonstrative!" said Jessie, wonderingly.

"Yes. I *have* given up the old breezy manner in which I used to fight dragons; still, I think that is owing to circumstances. A peculiar awe has fallen over us with the misfortunes, and therefore noise of any kind appears in

congruous ; besides, I have come to love quiet. But there are so many things that I don't understand — my own soul least of all."

Jessie wondered if the recent news had anything to do with this. For Charlie Westlake *had* decided to remain abroad another year. May was really worse after her winter of dissipation, and they had determined to spend the ensuing winter at Naples. Mrs. Westlake would not be left alone, and Charlie felt it his duty to stay.

So that added another year to the waiting. Then the accounts from Clement had not been so bright. The firm had met with some serious losses in shipping, owing to the unfortunate state into which the war had plunged all commercial affairs.

"I hoped to return in five years," he wrote, "but I find the period had better be extended to seven, as when I once reach home, I shall never want to leave it, I fancy. I often picture the household again at Home Nook, little changed, except the inevitable change of growing older ; yet I can hardly realize that Madge and Jessie have reached woman's estate. Ah, if Heaven will only spare us to see each other's faces and clasp each other's hands, I shall be content."

Mr. Ashburton had insisted that the fact of his blindness should be withheld from Clement.

"He grieved sorely enough for all other misfortunes, and it can do no good to add this care to those which already oppress him," the father said.

Madge was resolute, and would take no journey, though she did seem to improve at home. Jessie could not even persuade her to spend a few days at Riverside ; so she paid her promised visit alone.

A sweet, sad pleasure. There had been some changes at Riverside as well. Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth had gone away, and another clergyman had come in his place. New houses had started up here and there, bringing in

strange residents; the handsome Westlake mansion was closed, though the grounds were still kept in perfect order by the gardener left in charge. And there was dear old Home Nook! It was a comfort to see no alterations made here. And yet Jessie sighed. The thought of coming back began to grow dream-like indeed.

Hetty Bright welcomed her warmly. It was quite evident that Mrs. Rachel was failing slowly, but her faith and resignation were still delightful to witness.

Hetty told her all the gossip of the place — who were gone away, who were married, how the church was filled with new faces, and the strange clergyman, who, good as he was, could never be Mr. Kenneth. Old Mrs. Deane was still alive, tormenting her daughter-in-law.

"I've been thinking that if I were a rich woman, I should open a sort of home for these queer people, who make every one so miserable about them, and for poor people who have no homes," said Hetty. "It would be a deed of Christian charity."

"Indeed it would," returned Jessie, warmly.

"There is poor Bessie Deane worn to a shadow, and she will be badgered into her grave by that unreasonable old woman! It doesn't seem to me that parents have a right to torment their children, even if they did take care of them when they were young and helpless!"

Jessie thought of her father enduring his trials with silent grace, and inwardly gave thanks. Yes, their lot might be much worse.

And in talking over the old neighbors, Hetty presently came to the Westlakes.

"They're having a gay time, I heard. Miss Dixon, their dress-maker, you remember, was in here a few days ago, and said that Miss Rossiter had lovers by the dozens, and might have been a countess, or duchess, or something, but that she was in love with her cousin, and Madam does not want the fortune to go out of the family. They think

Miss Rossiter is rather consumptive ; but it is my opinion that it comes of racing and racketing around, and going to balls every night. It would wear out any woman, unless she was made of iron."

"May always appeared to be rather delicate," said Jessie, simply.

"It doesn't seem to me very sensible to go away for one's health, and endure twice the hardships one would at home! But that's rich people's pleasure, I suppose. They are going to be married before they come home."

"They! Who?" gasped Jessie.

"Why, young Mr. Westlake and Miss May. At least so Miss Dixon said, and she hears from Mrs. Westlake. It seems so strange! Only the other day you were all children, and now he has grown into a fine young fellow. He used to drop in here and talk over old times, when you were all living at Home Nook. He thinks a deal of you and Madge. I should be sorry to see him thrown away upon that Rossiter girl, if she has a mint of money."

"Hetty," exclaimed her sister, gently, "it is no business of ours, you know."

"To be sure not; and yet, now that I suppose it never will be, I may as well confess that I had a half hope he would take a fancy to Jessie here, for I know he did like her wonderfully! There, the murder is out!"

Miss Hetty dropped her duster, and Mrs. Rachel gave Jessie a tender, comforting glance.

"O, Hetty! How could you be so thoughtless?" she said, in a voice of soft reproof.

"I'm sure Jessie is deserving of the best fortune in the world."

"He never thought of me in that manner," said Jessie, calmly; thankful that it was she, and not Madge, who was suspected.

"Well, then he may marry whomsoever he likes," returned Miss Hetty, stiffly.

Jessie tried to banish the strange heat and color from her face, and bring her nerves back to their former calmness. After all, this was the merest gossip, and Miss Dixon might have surmised it. Charlie *was* noble and true, loyal to the heart's core, and Madge should not first learn distrust through her. So it was best not to mention it.

Indeed, Charlie Westlake's letters had become a great solace to Madge, — not merely for the pleasant break they made in the monotony of her life, but the clinging, dependent part of her nature sent out its tiny tendrils towards him in search of support, — her one delightful oasis in the life that bordered closely on the desert, if it was not actually there; for it appeared as if at every step she sank in the harsh, gray sand, while sharp, cutting winds blew about on every side. **And yet it seemed only yesterday that she was a happy child.**

CHAPTER XIII.

PHILIP.

ONE chilly December afternoon, Philip surprised them all by returning home earlier than usual. His face was flushed, his eyes feverish and haggard, and the lines about his mouth tensely drawn, as if he were fighting hard with an unseen enemy.

Jessie sprang up in alarm.

"Hush," Philip said, softly. "I am not well, to be sure, and could not see with this splitting headache; so I thought I would come home. I have been working pretty hard for the last fortnight, and taken some cold; but a little rest will set me all straight again."

He spoke cheerfully, but there was a tremulousness in his voice, and Jessie remarked the shiver that ran through his frame.

"Is there anything I can get for you?" she asked.

"No, my dear child. I want to lie down here on the sofa and be covered nice and warm. Don't look so frightened, mother. Am I not as likely to have a cold as any one else? Or did you all think me invulnerable?"

"You never have been ill," she answered, with some anxiety.

"And I am not going to be ill now. But I feel so tired and sleepy!"

Jessie spread a thick shawl over him, bathed his forehead, remarking how the pulses in the temples throbbed. A sudden, sharp pain came to her heart. What if — But no, every day was sufficient for itself, and she would not borrow trouble.

The mother watched in a peculiarly apprehensive mood. Philip was their main stay, their comfort. His sturdy courage, his cheerful temperament, his unvarying good health, had rendered him a kind of tower of strength in their eyes.

He breathed fast and hard, though he was soon asleep. The flush assumed a purplish hue on his cheek and brow, but left a line of deathly white on the outer edges. There was something peculiar in the face, not merely the symptoms of an ordinary cold.

"O, mamma, what do you think?" and Jessie's lip quivered

"My darling, we can tell nothing at present. I wish Dr. Conway was in the city."

The physician had been in that morning, as he had taken up the habit of calling in a friendly fashion now and then, and happened to remark that he should be out of the city for a day or two.

"We might have some one else."

"Yes;" rather doubtfully.

When Madge came home, she was quite startled, and would have gone at once, but Philip roused while they were talking.

"You are all needlessly alarmed," he exclaimed. "I shall be quite well by morning. Jessie, bathe my head again—will you not? It felt so nice and cool. And please do not worry."

They obeyed his behest. Night dropped her mantle of gray gloom over them all, a silent household indeed. Of late, Mr. Ashburton had taken a wonderful fancy for music, having been quite an excellent pianist in his younger days, and now that reading and other sources of interest failed, he had returned to this olden love. He would often sit at the piano for hours together, improvising sad, sweet strains, and sometimes singing to them fragments of hymns. But to-night there was no sound of melody, no tender talking. Each heart was heavy with a dim foreboding.

Philip declared that he felt better at bed-time, and went to his room with some of his usual cheerfulness. At midnight the threatened storm came on, wild gusts of wind and furious dashes of rain, and the morning dawned gloomily.

"It will not do for Philip to go out," declared Madge peremptorily, "even if he should be better."

He thought he was. His head did not ache, only felt dull and heavy; but if they would not let him go down town, he might as well lie there. But his smile had a wan and languid expression, and his voice was husky.

"Dr. Conway will not be at home until to-morrow," Madge remarked, lingering in the doorway before she went to school. "Do you consider it necessary to call in a stranger, mamma?"

"Perhaps we had better wait."

Madge went to school not altogether satisfied. A long, wearisome day it proved, for it seemed as if the children were unusually tiresome and annoying. But at noon the storm ceased, and, although the sky was still dense and lowering, it was some relief not to have it rain.

Mrs. Ashburton met her at the door with an anxious face.

"My child," she exclaimed, "you must go for a physician immediately. Leave word for Dr. Conway to come as soon as he returns."

"And Philip is worse?"

"His fever is much higher, and he has been slightly delirious for the last hour."

Madge started at once. It was almost dusk of the short winter day when she returned, and she flew to Philip's apartment. Jessie stood beside the bed, silent and tearful.

"O, Philip!"

"He doesn't seem to know any one now, and grows worse every moment. When will the doctor come?"

"Not before seven. He was out too,—Dr. Hurst, I mean,—and he seems next best to our own kind friend. O, Jessie!"

They clasped hands in silence. What bitter trial was before them?

"Everything does happen to us," Madge sobbed.

"We can only pray for the best."

Philip tossed restlessly, and muttered at intervals. His eyes were wild and glassy, without a gleam of recognition.

"It makes my heart ache to see him. Our own dear, bright Philip, our great rock! O, Jessie! could God take him from us!"

"O, my darling, don't think of that."

They counted the moments with aching hearts. The supper was scarcely tasted, and after a weary while the doctor made his appearance.

Dr. Hurst saw that they were full of apprehension, and since the case would be in Dr. Conway's hands, it was hardly necessary to add to their alarm.

"A fever, of course," he said; "and fevers are apt to make a rather tedious illness."

"Will it be very severe?" Madge asked, tremblingly.

"It is almost too early to decide;" rather evasively.

Then he gave some directions, and promised to call in the morning.

"You must go to bed," Jessie said to Madge, as the evening waned. "You are taxed all day, while I can rest, and it will not do to have you worn out."

Madge went, unwillingly. It was long past midnight when she fell into a broken and troubled slumber, starting up at the earliest dawn.

"He was rather quiet through the night," Jessie said, 'but the fever is rising again. If you can sit and watch him a little while, Madge, I will run down and help mamma with the breakfast."

Madge took the seat near the head of the bed. The sky was cold and comfortless. Down low in the east, a faint yellow streak heralded the sunrise, but it was still gloomy. She shivered with sad apprehensions.

Philip opened his eyes, and fixed them steadily upon her face, looking so long that she began to grow frightened.

"Madge," in a hoarse, peculiar whisper.

"Dear Philip;" and she brushed away the tumbled hair.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes; shall I call any one?"

"No. It is a secret. I want to tell you — if I can remember —"

He raised himself partially, resting on his elbow, and glanced furtively around.

"There is no one here," she said, reassuringly.

"I want to tell you — I suspect — mind, only that — what was I saying? — I want you to go to Mr. Graham — be sure to see him, and tell him that I am afraid — to keep my books until I come back. Howard told me in confidence. I was so sorry for him, poor fellow, and I offered to explain the matter. You'll do it, Madge?"

His eyes were full of feverish wistfulness, and his fingers grasped the counterpane tightly.

"See Mr. Graham, and tell him —" she said, slowly, striving to steady Philip's wandering brain.

"Yes. That I can explain it all when I come back — to-morrow, perhaps — and not to be hard upon Howard. If I could only think —"

"Is it anything about money?"

"Not to let them touch my books until I come. He said he was going to Europe. Poor Nelly is there. I wonder if we shall ever see her again?"

"Is that all I must tell Mr. Graham?"

"And you'll keep it a secret! I'm so tired, so tired!"

With that he dropped back on his pillow and began to mutter incoherently. In vain Madge questioned — she could learn nothing more.

Mrs. Ashburton came up to take her place. At the breakfast table she asked Jessie what Philip had talked of principally.

"He has been troubled a little about money, but has said nothing coherent. I suppose he does feel very anxious. I begin to realize how hard it is to be poor. I believe I shall never say again that poor people are most free from care. We have Clement, to be sure—"

Madge sighed. "If we should ever be rich again, I think we would have a different feeling for those fighting for very life, as it were. But Philip has not said anything about his business?"

"No." Jessie glanced up in a little wonder.

Madge made no further remark. Had Philip really confided a trust to her?

She tried to question him again, but the subject had gone from him altogether. All day in school she thought about it, and could hardly decide whether it was of any importance or not. But he had been so urgent!

"Yes, I do believe that I had better go," she said to herself, decisively. "It can do no harm."

For a wonder, there were no children to be kept in by way of punishment. She walked to the avenue and took a car, but her heart went back to Philip.

It seemed so odd to go trudging about in these business streets full of hurrying men. She had to look a little for the place. Here it was—"Graham, Osborne, & Co."

She entered hesitatingly. Bales, boxes, and packages of merchandise—clerks anxious to finish their day's work, and too busy or too gruff to pay much attention.

"Can I see Mr. Graham?" she ventured, timidly.

Perhaps no one expected so sweet a voice behind the brown veil that muffled her.

"Mr. Graham went home an hour ago."

"Mr. Ward Graham is here—in the office," said another voice.

Philip had not specified which one must be intrusted with the confidence. What should she do?

"I think I will see him;" after some hesitation.

"This way, if you please."

Madge was led through the long building, so dark part of the way that the gas was burning.

"He is in here — engaged," and her guide looked rather disconcerted. "Mr. Graham, a lady wishes to see you."

Mr. Graham gave a glance to the passage-way without.

"In a moment," he responded, briefly.

It was five, rather than one. To Madge it appeared almost interminable. She began to wonder whether the message was of so much importance, after all.

Then Mr. Graham stepped out with his visitor, still talking.

"Perhaps you had better drop in to-morrow morning and have a talk with father, before the business is really taken in hand. I start at noon, you know, and shall be gone six months."

"Very well."

The man made a slight inclination of the head, and gave Madge a sharp look, that startled her, bringing the color to her face.

"You wished to see me?"

The voice had a peculiar gentlemanliness in it, that restored Madge to self-possession. Obeying the gesture of his hand, she followed him into the small but cheerful-looking office. There was a fire burning in the grate, and the gas was lighted. The glow and warmth were so pleasant that Madge involuntarily threw aside her veil.

"I come to bring a message from my brother, Mr. Philip Ashburton," she said.

A change passed over Mr. Graham's face. Indeed, it seemed to Madge that he was hardly pleased; so she hurriedly continued, —

"He is very ill."

"Ill! He was not well when he left on Tuesday, I believe. Is it anything serious?"

"A fever. We are afraid —" and her lip quivered.

She sat in range of the double light, her eyes downcast, and their long bronze lashes drooping over her cheeks, that flushed and paled alternately. Not handsome, perhaps, to a man accustomed to seeing queens of beauty, but there was a delicacy and nobility about the fair young face which attracted his attention.

“And the message was —”

If Madge had only glanced up to the questioning face, whose eyes were studying every line of hers, the result might have been different. But she was pre-occupied with her own anxieties, and doubtful of the actual necessity of this step.

“A little trouble about some accounts, I think;” and her look wandered towards the fire. “He was slightly delirious — at least not quite coherent, and he begged me to come — to say, that as soon as he was able, he would attend to the books — he fancied that it might be soon. And he spoke of a person by the name of Howard.”

“What did he say?” in an eager tone.

“That he was sorry for him, and had offered to explain some matter. There isn’t anything wrong?” and she glanced at him apprehensively.

“When will your brother be able to come down, do you think?” he asked.

“Perhaps not for weeks. We are afraid he will be very, very ill. O, there is nothing wrong, I know! Philip would cut off his right hand sooner than do anything dishonorable. What is it?”

She came and stood by Mr. Graham, her eyes full of tears, and her whole frame trembling with excitement.

“A little difficulty — yes, I suppose he could explain it, or, if he had staid — nay, do not distress yourself; it will all come right, I know.”

Her agitation moved him curiously.

“What wrong is there about it? For Philip is strictly, sternly honest.”

"You would hardly understand all the business details ; indeed, I do not know myself. Howard has left his place, and the two being away together causes some confusion. I think that is all."

"O, you do not understand him at all, if you suspect him of the slightest wrong. He is goodness and nobleness, and truth itself."

Ward Graham believed it. And yet there was an ugly fact to be explained, disguise it as he might, or even hide it from this young girl.

"Have you any brothers besides?" he asked.

"Only one. He is away. And papa is — nearly blind."

Her soft lip quivered with pain. The wistful young face was full of entreaty and anxious love.

"My dear child," he returned, gravely, "do not distress yourself about this matter. When your brother recovers, it will all be right."

"But you *do* understand?"

"Sufficiently for the present. No harm will come of the delay ; that I can assure you. I am glad to have heard the cause of his absence."

It seemed to Madge that neither of them knew very clearly what they were talking about. It would be ungracious in her to persist in questioning when Mr. Graham had nothing to tell, or did not care to use his knowledge. That it was of any vital importance she could not believe. And since there was no more to say, she turned towards the door.

"I am obliged to you, and I hope your brother will soon recover."

"Thank you," in a tremulous voice.

Ward Graham leaned his head upon his hand, and fell into deep thought. A very simple occurrence indeed, and nothing that threw any light upon the matter. There was a deficit in Philip Ashburton's books of two thousand dollars. Howard had discovered it late yesterday, and

announced his own resignation at the same time, stating that a more lucrative position had been offered him. To-day, the head book-keeper had gone over the account, and referred the matter to the elder Mr. Graham, who, in a moment of haste, had turned it over to his son.

But Ward Graham, it must be confessed, had a tender chord in his heart, and Miss Ashburton had appealed to it more by her manner and her evident distress than by what she had said. Of the two, he would have suspected Howard sooner, though he knew little of either of them.

That evening he made some inquiries concerning the Ashburtons, as chance happened to throw Dr. Conway in his path. So he hurried to the store the next morning, and undertook a critical revision of the books before his father arrived. It was just as the book-keeper had said. Yet he felt a strong disposition to save this young man, who was helpless to act for himself.

"Warren is to be in again this morning," he said to his father, after the first salutations had passed; "but I want a little talk with you about this young Ashburton."

"I gave orders for a warrant —" and the elder paused, startled by the grave face of his son.

"I accidentally met Dr. Conway last night, who, it appears, has known the family a long while. Philip is at present very ill with typhoid fever, and the only thing that gives the doctor any hope is his youth and good habits. He speaks of him in the highest terms, and though I uttered no suspicion, I know he would scout such a thing at once. The father is nearly blind, and the family have been peculiarly unfortunate.

"Which you think excuses him for dishonesty?"

"No; but just at this crisis it would be cruel to proceed to extremities. I want you to give him a chance."

"There is too much of this thing already in the world, Ward. Young fellows taking what does not belong to them, and being tenderly excused, from a spasm of false sympathy on some one's part. It is all wrong."

"You do not suspect Howard at all?"

"Howard?" in astonishment. "Why, his accounts were clear enough. The deficit was in Ashburton's."

"And he had Ashburton's books — made the discovery, and resigned in a manner that would have excited *my* suspicion."

"But Ashburton's course does not."

"I cannot, somehow, believe ill of him. His father ruined himself to pay business debts about which there might have been a question."

"There never ought to be a question in such cases. Any debt is sacred, and to be paid if it takes one's last penny. I believe I did hear some talk about it, however; but Ashburton had a good deal of property in his hands."

"It left him penniless. They have struggled hard to get along, living in the most simple manner possible. Philip is the main stay of the family. If he has been led into wrong-doing by any want —"

"It is not that. He had a good salary."

"I believe he can and will explain the matter. I want you to give him an opportunity. To this end I shall refund the two thousand dollars out of my own private purse, and depend upon you to see that the utmost discretion is preserved on the subject. Withdraw the charge, and tell Warren we have concluded to let the matter drop."

"Are you crazy?"

"I ask it as a personal favor of you. When Philip Ashburton recovers, if he ever should, he will have the manliness, I feel assured, to make some reparation, if he has been led into error."

"And if he does not, the loss will be yours! Well, you are generous!"

Ward Graham wondered whether he had not better tell his father of the interview with Miss Ashburton. The elder would laugh at him a little, and declare that he had been caught by a pretty face. No, that was his secret.

However, before Warren, the private detective, dropped in, he had won a reluctant assent from his father, paid over the amount, which he insisted upon rigorously, and the case was relinquished. But the elder considered it foolishly wrong. If Ashburton was not at fault it gave Howard a chance to escape also.

He quieted his conscience by another step a fortnight later. Enclosing Ashburton's salary for the month in an envelope, — for he heard that the young man was lying at the point of death, — he merely stated that it had been found necessary to fill his place.

"I dare say that he will be glad enough to get off in that fashion, if he should live; and if not, I shall be thankful that I kept quiet about it," Mr. Graham said to himself. "But Ward always had a soft spot in his heart."

It was true that Philip lay at the point of death. He had grown rapidly worse each day, and Madge, wild with anxiety, procured a substitute, that she might remain at home and assist in the nursing. What terrible days and nights those were! In what anguish of spirit they prayed to have this cup pass from them!

Mr. Ashburton paced the floor with slow steps, vainly questioning why this young life should be taken instead of his. All the homely details of the household went on, bringing that sense of incongruity so hard to bear. The clear, crisp winter sunshine seemed a mockery. The days with their strange terror, the nights with their awesome silence, broken only by whispers, or the voice that sounded unnatural to their ears by stress of huskiness and suffering, babbling of old days, boyhood's sports and friends, and dreams never to be realized, perhaps. The cares and burdens of the present were forgotten. The spirit, freed from the clanking chain of toil, revelled again in the bright land of youth, sunning itself on the heights of hope, and being bathed in the golden glow.

At last, the moments when they counted heart-beats,

when the pale flame of humanity fluttered like a drooping shadow, hardly knowing whether it was summoned across the waveless stream or not; a time when earthly aid seemed powerless, and they could only pray.

Only pray! As if God were less than human skill. But besides the prayers, there was the slow anguish of resignation, that only has its perfect work when all hope is gone.

There was a faint enkindling of the nearly spent forces, and the physician, looking on, breathed the word of comfort so precious to them all.

Jessie buried her face in her mother's lap, still doubting.

"O," exclaimed Madge, with a cry of joy, "is it true? Do you think he can recover?"

"It is possible, with the care you will give him. But it has been a hard struggle."

Then the doctor went out softly. Tremulous hands were folded over them, and in a broken, tearful voice, Mr. Ashburton gave thanks for this mercy, for the son restored to them, for the great shadow lifted from their pathway. Never were hearts more devoutly grateful.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WORLD AGAIN.

DURING the excitement and anxiety of Philip's illness, Madge had quite forgotten her errand to his place of business. Indeed, the importance she had at first attached to it died out gradually, and only an indistinct remembrance floated through her brain. It was not until after the crisis that Mrs. Ashburton opened the note to her son.

"How very kind in them to send the salary for the whole month!" Jessie exclaimed.

Madge fell into a reverie.

"He will lose his situation, of course."

"I suppose it is necessary to have it filled;" and Jessie sighed a little.

"But we will not worry about that when we have him," said Mrs. Ashburton. "I think God will open some path."

Madge glanced over at the cold sunset sky. Somehow their lives seemed like that. A weary waste of neutral tints, a little yellow gleam to show where the sun of prosperity had gone down.

She had returned to school; but after the strain on her nerves she was feeling weary and dispirited. And now another long stretch of misfortune. Were they indeed fated?

Philip was very weak, but cheerful, and improved rapidly, the doctor thought. Yet even that appeared tedious at times. And here were the most trying months still to come.

"It is almost four years since we left Home Nook,"

Madge said one evening. "It seems more like a century. I wonder if we ever shall go back!"

"Are you tired of waiting, little sister? You were very bright and brave at first."

"And you think I have lost some of my courage?"

She glanced at Philip, who had been promoted to the 'ignity of dressing-gown and easy-chair.

"I do not know that it is courage altogether; but hope, perhaps."

"I should like to go back to the old life—should you not, Jessie? Just for a smell of the flowers, and a glimpse of the sunshine, and a little rest in the dear old corners that were so cosy. Instead, we drift farther and farther off."

"I remember a sunny face that rested in my lap one evening," said Mrs. Ashburton, "and wondered if we ever could feel thankful for trials."

"No, mamma, I think we cannot. That was the last bright evening, the very night the troubles first came;" and Madge drooped her head to hide a tear or two.

"But one can learn patience and resignation."

"Yet it is so hard, mamma, dearest. One *can* endure, and that doesn't seem to me the highest kind of courage. There is something still wanting."

"Which God gives to all who ask him."

Did she ask him truly? She prayed, of course, but nothing seemed to come of it. Grace to help her bear the trials; but they were as sharp and bitter every day, and appeared to rasp some new sensitive nerve that they had missed hitherto.

Why was it? Would Jessie be so calm and sweet if she was jostled about by the great, rough world?

And Jessie shrank a little, it must be confessed. Every year they grew poorer. Their little hoard had all been spent, and now they would be compelled to make a drain upon Clement; for Madge, single-handed, could not fill

the void. And so Home Nook appeared more of an impossibility than ever before.

Once only Madge touched upon her errand for Philip, but she saw that it had completely passed from his mind. He had with his earliest convalescence questioned his mother whether any message had ever been sent to him, and the matter of the salary being so entirely business-like, he had dismissed the subject with a little sigh. When he recovered, there would be the olden search for something to do.

February ended with unusual mildness. Philip began to walk out a little, and then rapidly regained his strength. It made them all happier to have him able to go about. As soon as he felt strong enough he took a journey down to the old house of Graham & Co.

The book-keeper mentioned it to Mr. Graham, who was not in at the time.

"Did he ask for me?" was the rather sharp query.

"No. We talked a little about business. There's no chance for him here again?"

"Not the slightest," in a cold, decisive tone.

"So I told him."

Mr. Graham gnawed his mustache a little.

"Ward was a fool!" he said to himself. "Still, let the poor fellow go. He has had bad luck enough!"

So Philip Ashburton little guessed at the cloud that overshadowed him, even when several applications, to whom Graham & Osborne had been given as a reference, were declined. Still, something must be done.

He obtained a situation at last in a broker's office, with a man whose face and manner he disliked at the first interview. Yet he could hardly afford to be particular.

Horace Bradley was well known as a sharp and shrewd financial operator. He took the measure of Philip Ashburton at once, covertly laughed at the honesty in every line of his face, and the frankness so strongly characteristic

of it. The young fellow would be useful to him in various ways, and he meant to turn the connection to good account while it was fresh and taking.

Philip was quite ready for business, and went at it with an energy that gratified his employer. New to these ways, unsuspecting, and most anxious to give satisfaction, he was quite deep in the mysteries of that most fascinating species of gambling — speculation — before he scarcely realized where he stood.

It was in the time of the great excitements, when men ran wild over victory or defeat, coined the life-blood of friend or enemy into gold — what did it matter? The fever entered many a noble soul and poisoned it, and the haste to be rich bade fair to sap the strong and true foundations whereon all nobility of character rests.

Before he was hardly aware he was drifting with the tide. What if he joined this mad rush, and won the golden fortune that seemed to stand aloof from honest exertion? They all needed it so much! And there was Home Nook. If he could help Clement in restoring this heritage!

The struggle and decision were forced upon him sooner than he expected. He came home, one evening, looking more worn and tired than usual.

"What is the matter?" asked Jessie. "You are over-working."

"No, it is not that," with a faint smile.

"Then something troubles you."

He made no answer for several minutes.

"You have not lost your situation again?"

That was in Madge's quick, tremulous voice.

"I have given it up," calmly.

"But I thought you liked it."

"I did at first. There was something exhilarating in it, but I understood only one side. And though there may be pleasures and profits, there are dangers and evils as well."

"But I should think that part belonged to Mr. Bradley rather than you."

"Let me explain what occurred to-day. Mr. Bradley has sent me out on more than one occasion to purchase some particular stocks at a rather high rate, while, unknown to me, an agent would follow in my footsteps to sell. This would cause a rush to his office; but he would purchase only a small amount, to give the proceeding color, blandly declaring to all late comers that his order was filled. To-day it was land-warrants. I saw more than the number he wanted lying in the desk, and told him so, as I had resolved that he should never set me about such work again. To me it seems nothing less than downright swindling."

"And then?" continued Jessie.

"I did refuse. We had some high words;" and Philip colored. "Of course it ended in a discharge. I wonder sometimes, with Madge, if we are fated to be unlucky — only I know, after all, there is no such thing as luck."

Mr. Bradley had stung Philip with a little sentence that he did not care to repeat. He had said, —

"Your past record is not so entirely faultless, Mr. Ashburton, that you need set up these high ideas of honesty."

When Philip had pressed him for an explanation, he either would not or could not give it. Still it left the young man feeling hurt and sore.

"But all commercial life is not full of tricks and dishonesty," said Madge.

"No, there are many honorable exceptions. Yet it seems now as if a new and fatal spirit had seized upon the souls of too many, alas! No matter how wild the venture, there are hundreds standing ready to plunge into the whirlpool. Every one appears possessed with an eager thirst for riches, and fabulous fortunes are made in a few months. But I have seen the other side. Widows and orphans, or poor men induced to invest their small savings

— the labor of years, perhaps — in some of these schemes, and have it swept away. It is in most cases the rich and unscrupulous who gain, while the poor grow poorer, crowded on every side. Yet I have sometimes felt tempted to join the successful throng.”

“Not at the price of honor, my son,” interposed Mr. Ashburton, who had glided into the room with his slow, soft step, as he had insensibly fallen into the peculiar quietude belonging to the blind.

“It would be that.” Philip half turned and slipped his hand into his father’s, which was white and slender as a woman’s. “I have been debating this thing in my mind for the past month. I have met with opportunities for success, if one could only forget that for the few who succeed, hundreds are plunged into ruin and misery. Perhaps this civil war is to be the great test of our national character, and that bloodless battles are to be fought, which shall determine the growth and purity of our souls.”

“Yes, the grand issues are not merely with the victory of to-day — the defeat of contending armies is not our only failure. It is whether we shall come out of it braver and nobler, having strength given us to buffet through, or drift down the tide with the countless throngs who have proved too weak for destiny.”

“It seems to me those heroic souls who have laid their lives on their country’s altar are to be envied,” Philip said, a little regretfully. “They have given the best, and *all* they had. And now the country, in her deathly strait, calls for more.”

They all knew then what was in Philip’s calm, resolute face. Throughout the struggle the fires of youth and patriotism had burned brightly in his soul, but his duty had been here.

“I am glad we have come to this subject,” he began in a slow, peculiar tone. “It has haunted me for weeks. Two paths seem open before me. In legitimate business

there is no chance. Everything is in the depths of depression and there are only speculation and the battle-field. I have been tempted to enter the first arena. I cannot tell you how the prospect of winning back Home Nook has lured me on to make a gambler's desperate throw. There is honor in many transactions, and principle and right also, but it *does* harden men's hearts in the end. Could I keep my hands clean if I dipped them in this foul, seething tide?"

"I relinquished it in all honor," answered Mr. Ashburton, "and I would not have it redeemed in dishonor. That it has been a sore trial to me I will confess; that I have stumbled over thorns and gone astray, trying to find some easier path than that marked out by God, I humbly acknowledge. But better poverty and loss of all than to have one's soul dragged down to perdition in this unholy strife for wealth. Philip, my son, I honor your scruples. Whether God prosper us or not, we will do his will."

"Thank you," Philip said in a voice of deep emotion. "I have sometimes wondered if this subject had not taken a morbid tinge in my brain. But to look upon wrecks of truth, and manliness, and self-respect, and to see the dangers that beset the slippery path, must needs warn like a beacon-light. And when a man has once been face to face with death —"

"Yes," Mr. Ashburton returned, slowly, "there is a life beyond this; and 'what will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' We too often forget this."

"Then the other path —"

Philip's voice trembled perceptibly.

"O!" and Madge knelt beside him with a passionate cry. "Not that, Philip! Not absence, and danger, and death itself! The country has no claim upon you."

"She has a claim upon every man in her pangs of mortal anguish. I want to say now, that if we had been

happy and prosperous, I should have gone at first. Ah, I can never tell you how my pulses used to throb and thrill at the thought! But God made a path of duty for me here, and I was fortunate enough to have my place filled. Now everything has changed, and while it would wrench my heart with keenest agony to leave you, if I stay I too may become a burden. There is so little doing that it is almost impossible to find employment on remunerative terms. Bounties, on the other hand, are high."

"But to go — for money!"

There was a flash of scorn in Madge's eyes, a touch of it in her tone.

"My darling, it seems as if God in this wise opened the way for me. I should not leave you utterly dependent upon Clement or yourself."

"As if the money would not be the price of blood!" and Madge sprang to her feet, her face flushing, and her sensitive nostrils quivering with subtle pain.

"That is the youthful and enthusiastic view;" and Philip smiled gravely. "It once seemed to me that patriotism could not be bought, that I should spurn anything but the purest and most heroic sacrifice; yet I have come to look upon matters in a different light. Are not wives and little ones dear to these men who know not what hour they may be called upon to lay down their lives? Will it make them fight better, think you, to know that these precious ones may be starving?"

Madge was silent.

"There is always some divine justice in the law of compensation. We do not often penetrate its intricacies in the heats of youth, and it seems to me but right that the men who stay at home should help to make it easier for those who go. You know that was what Clement thought."

"But since you have a substitute —"

This was Jessie's soft, pleading, regretful voice.

"One comes to see things in a different light, my darling. I am young and strong, and have my country's best interest at heart. If I enlist in her cause, I shall do it with my whole soul, keeping nothing back. And if she bridges over the path whereon I might falter, if she provides me with the means of caring for you, so that my burdens are lightened, shall I march with less willing feet, do you think?"

"You place the subject of bounties in a romantic light," Madge answered, still unconvinced.

"And in a practical light also. I shall take no hasty step, but I want you to help me to decide wisely."

They all glanced at him silently for a moment, understanding in a dim fashion how much of uncomprehended heroism went into every-day living when it was true, and not bound hand and foot by shams. With God between the human soul and its own thought, the meretricious glitter of high-sounding terms fell away — it was the real thing — the bread to strengthen fainting bodies — the red wine of another Agony infusing into the soul its own mysterious rapture of pain, of struggle, and ultimate victory.

Jessie wiped away a few tears. "If we could only see the end!" she said. "And yet God must be in it all, bridging over the floods that rage and swell. We cannot go outside of his plans when we take the work he gives us to do."

"That is it," returned Philip, gravely. "And it seems now as if all other avenues were closed to me, as if this one path was left for me to walk in honorably. And if we have faith in him —"

"I am afraid I have not," sobbed Madge. "The hurt and pain, the stumbling over stones and thorns —"

"But we are to build with the stones — that takes them out of our way, you see. And when the vines are trained the thorns are beyond their power to wound."

He came and clasped her tenderly in his arms, kissing

away the fast-falling tears. O, how *could* they do without him? Yet she felt the brave resolve in every limb, saw it in every feature, and most of all in the clear, unshrinking eyes. Another thought wafted a breath of comfort to her.

"If you could go out as an officer!"

"No, Madge; if I go at all, it will be as a private, to serve my country in her desperate need. And if I accept the bounty, it will only be like receiving back what we once paid away. Think of it as Clement's money. One thing is certain. I cannot stay here in idleness. That would shame my manhood too much."

Mr. Ashburton folded his hands over his son's head.

"God be with thee," he said, "wherever thou mayest go! I give thee into his hands."

They knew then that their father would make no objection. Mrs. Ashburton's heart was filled with tremulous emotion, and Jessie wiped away some sad tears.

Now that the ice was broken, the subject was discussed almost hourly. Madge opposed it with the unreason of youthful passion and pain, but Jessie came to view it with Philip's broader vision.

"After all," she said, "it is the spirit of self-sacrifice that hallows it, and renders it really nobler than if Philip had gone at first."

A new fire lay hidden in the depths of Philip's grave eyes, indicating a soul that could grasp its purposes keenly, and yet look at itself as well as the things without, growing into the dim and silent spaces where God had a work for it to do, no matter how small, how far removed from human vision. For he had learned to look beyond this perplexing life for rewards. The work was to be done here, the fruit garnered hereafter.

Yet, in spite of the heat and love, the tender shrinking from new pangs, the courage that seemed to wax and wane, they were all slowly drifting to one conclusion — the saddest of all, it appeared to them.

CHAPTER XV.

A MISSING LINK.

MADGE, returning home from school one June day, tired and languid, stopped the street car and entered. There were not many passengers, and being in no curious or speculative mood, she scarcely observed them; for all day she had been under the influence of a strange, terrible spell, battling with doubts and desires, questioning even God's goodness and mercy.

A gentleman from the opposite side changed his seat to one near her. She was too utterly crushed to consider whether it were an impertinence, and turned her face away.

"Miss Ashburton," a voice said presently.

She started then, and a wave of dim memory swept over her. Somewhere she had heard the voice, seen the face — where had it been? Yet she was in no frame of mind to be gracious to one so nearly a stranger.

"Then you have forgotten me?"

There was a slight touch of reproach in the tone.

She gave another quick glance, and seemed to study a moment.

"Mr. Graham, I believe;" rather hesitatingly.

"Yes;" with a pleasant smile. "I am glad to meet you, although I had so nearly passed out of your mind."

She made no answer, and was fain to return to her own sad thoughts.

"Not very courteous," he mused; and then he fancied the face held in its graver lines a deep trouble.

"Your brother is well — I hope —" he ventured again.

“Yes;” briefly, and with a rather cold intonation.

The car halted for a passenger. In the momentary pause he asked, even at the risk of appearing rude, —

“Is he in the city?”

The quick tears sprang to her eyes, and her lip quivered with pain.

“Pardon me.”

He uttered the two words in such a kind, gentlemanly tone, that they went to her heart. Still she made no reply; she could not have trusted her voice.

He studied the face partially turned away. Pale and rather thin, with a small, firm mouth, and beautifully rounded chin, the long bronze lashes that he remembered so well, and the eyes in a lustre of tears. What great sorrow burdened her thus in the outset of life? Aught connected with her brother?

She made a signal at the well-known corner. Mr. Graham assisted her out and led her to the pavement. There both paused involuntarily.

“Even at the risk of being considered intrusive,” he said, “I must ask you another question. You are in some trouble — is it about your brother?”

Madge gave a great gasp, swallowing something more bitter than tears.

“O, Mr. Graham! he was to enlist to-day!”

She looked so white and wan that it seemed as if she would faint. He drew her arm through his for support.

“Why —”

“There is nothing else to do,” she almost sobbed.

Mr. Graham watched her in great perplexity. They took several steps in silence, he thinking whether it would be possible to continue the conversation so inauspiciously begun. If her brother had been at fault, and there was no other resource? — He sympathized profoundly with her agitation. Dare he venture another question, this time to the point?

When the first strangeness of the rencounter subsided, a host of old recollections rushed over her. She paused abruptly.

"Mr. Graham," she began, "what happened last winter? Was it any mistake? Philip could have set that right. It was the commencement of fresh misfortunes for us."

"I wish he had set it right, as you say. I hoped he would make some explanation —"

Madge looked at him with a face full of terror. Faint blue lines settled about the mouth, and she trembled as if in an ague.

"Was there — anything? But you said — it was all right —" in a wandering manner, for it seemed as if she could hardly remember what she wanted to utter.

"Because you were in distress, and I hoped he would explain — some unfinished business."

With all his courage and strict sense of right, Ward Graham hesitated to accuse another unfairly.

"He went down to the store once after his recovery. He was politely discharged, you know;" and there was a touch of bitterness in her voice.

"Did he imagine there might be a reason —? How much are you all in his confidence? If there was any trouble or — wrong," hesitating at the word, "would he be likely to admit it at home?"

Madge was bewildered. Her quick eyes questioned the grave face bent upon her; then her straightforward nature cut the gordian knot at once.

"Mr. Graham, if there *is* anything wrong, it is a fatal mistake. For Philip would not, could not, do one act that might be questioned. He is as true and honest as — as the best and highest soul you will meet with in this world. Come and see him. For there has been some terrible misunderstanding, I begin to believe."

They walked on in silence until they reached the cottage, that looked oddly enough set in among the rows of

more pretentious houses. She let herself in with the latch key, and opening the parlor door, invited him to enter.

The shutters were partly closed, making a pleasant twilight within, and there was a fragrance of rose and geranium. She left him there to wonder how he had stumbled upon this half-explanation, and whether he could go on without wounding them irremediably. For somehow he had *not* felt quite satisfied with the termination of this affair. He had expected better things from Philip Ashburton. Surely this young face was honor and nobility itself. But then women never knew the temptations that encompassed their sons and brothers on every hand, the plausible schemes that were like a swift undertow in the tide.

Philip had been home half an hour. Madge knew without asking a question that his name was enrolled.

"Mr. Graham is here," she said. "Philip, I wonder if you remember, when you were first ill, of begging me to go to Mr. Graham with a message. Indeed, I think you do not, for I referred to it once afterwards, and you took no notice, though I fancied it might be because you did not wish to talk of it. There has been some mistake, I am sure, and he wishes it explained."

Madge had uttered this in a rapid breath. Philip hardly comprehended at first.

"I sent you to Mr. Graham?"

"Yes; on the second morning of your illness. Something about your books that you did not want overlooked, and a secret connected with a person by the name of Howard — I scarcely remember myself, except that Mr. Graham *did* appear to understand it — yet I am afraid it was all a terrible mistake —"

Philip looked at her in the utmost astonishment.

"When I was ill —?"

"Come and see Mr. Graham," she said, breathless with excitement and perplexity. "Only — Philip —" her

voice sinking to a whisper and her face deathly pale, "you never did a wrong or dishonorable action, you never —"

He kissed the throbbing lips for answer, and twining his arm around her, led her through the room.

"There *is* a mistake;" in a husky tone. "I think I can guess —"

They both returned to the parlor. Mr. Graham rose from his seat, and extended his hand, grasping Philip's cordially; but surprise kept the young man silent.

"I ought to apologize for this intrusion," he began in his low, finely-modulated voice, "but circumstances seem to have hurried me into it, and a belief that we might have something of importance to say to one another —"

"Mr. Graham," — filling the pause the other made, — "when my books were examined, were they found correct?"

Philip stood there bravely conscious of his own innocence, every feature in his face proud and calm. Not any guilt or deceit, not any subterfuge or underhand dealing would be found there.

Mr. Graham colored and hesitated, half wishing that Madge were not present.

"I desire to know just the truth."

"There was a deficit," Mr. Graham replied almost under his breath.

"How much?"

"Two thousand dollars."

Philip started as if he had been stung; Madge uttered a sharp cry of anguish.

"I will tell my story first," Mr. Graham resumed. "You went home ill one afternoon — I believe I was not there. But the next day, Howard, who took charge of your books, discovered some false entries and this deficiency. Mr. Bromley went over it again, and attested the truth. Howard, it appears, had given in his resignation that morning, though he had told Bromley nearly a week before that he had been offered a better situation. My

father asked him to come the next day, but he failed to make his appearance. I was on the eve of a business tour to Europe, as you will remember, and very much engrossed; so we did nothing all that day except to send for a private detective, who came too late for an interview with my father. I had just placed the matter in his hands, subject to some instructions the next morning, when your sister called. I believe I suspected Howard somewhat —”

“And you thought that I meant to plead for Philip!” Madge exclaimed, almost angrily, as he paused.

“I felt that if he were sick, we ought to defer any harsh measures. Pardon me if I was tempted to comfort you. Your youth, your agitation, your unbounded faith in your brother, moved me strongly; and that evening I met Dr. Conway, with whom I was slightly acquainted. He mentioned your family, and I heard some of your misfortunes, becoming convinced in my own mind that you were *not* the criminal. Before I left the next morning I made good the missing amount, and begged my father to keep the whole affair a secret. I felt certain that some explanation would be made upon your recovery.”

Philip’s countenance had gone through scarlet flushes of indignation and white heats of keenest pain, every feature being roused to play its part.

“The whole thing was false!” Madge said, haughtily. “Worse than that — cruel, unjust —”

“Hush, my darling. It is bitter enough, God knows. I have only to say, Mr. Graham, that I am no thief, though I cannot prove it now by anything beyond my simple word.”

But Philip’s clear, untrembling tone was sufficient guarantee to Mr. Graham.

“Had you any cause for distrusting Howard?”

“He had been dabbling a little in gold, through a friend, and was rather fortunate than otherwise, I fancied;

but on the morning of my last day at the store, he came to me in great distress, admitting that he had been unlucky, and had used some funds of the firm, but he was quite sure they were invested in a manner that would pay handsomely. But as his account was to be examined the next day, he begged me to let him have a thousand for a few hours, that it might look right at the time, and he would be sure to hand it back to me. I know that I had been struggling for several days against the approach of illness, and had hard work to decide between the strict right and the fear of being unjustly rigorous. I urged him to tell Mr. Graham, senior, offering to take that much upon myself if he desired it; but he had a hope of fighting it out, or if that failed, he spoke of an opportunity of going to Europe, which he should accept at once."

"And you let him have the money — I see now; but it was a false step on your part."

"No, I did not then," answered Philip. "It was hard to refuse, and I might not have made a firm stand. I went home early that day, thinking that I would consider the subject. I have no distinct recollection after that."

"And Howard is the real criminal! I cannot tell how it was, but I dare say he offered to take charge of your books — it would be very natural, in his place. He had all the next day —"

Philip buried his face in his hands. To have one's good name tarnished in a moment, and by one whom he would have befriended, appeared unspeakably bitter! It is harder, perhaps, to suffer for well-doing, for in the first keen pang the consciousness of innocence is overwhelmed by anguish. It is afterwards, when resignation steps in, that one bares his head to the storm.

"My dear young friend, no one can regret this more than I. Yet we shall come out to the truth, and it is not too late for reparation. You must have had some suspicion, however?"

"As I said, I remember coming home that day with a blinding headache, and nothing seems clear for weeks afterwards. I can hardly imagine my sending Madge on such an errand! In my senses I should have requested a visit from some one in authority."

"If I had *not* gone!" Madge exclaimed, with vehement sorrow.

"Perhaps it was best," Mr. Graham answered. "But for that the law might have taken its course, and there would have been more or less publicity, even if we had come to the truth sooner."

"My illness would have shielded Howard in any event," Philip said, gravely. "And since it was only my word against the books —"

He shuddered, for he seemed even yet on the brink of a frightful gulf.

"Bromley would hear nothing against Howard, and his opinion had some influence with my father, I think. I wonder if he could have meant to shield him?"

"How could he! O, Philip! how cruel and unjust the world really is! And that God should let us go astray with all these misunderstandings, that were no fault of ours, and the explanation come too late, too late!"

She was sobbing piteously in her brother's arms, her bright hair a tumbled mass of curls about her shoulders.

"It is not too late, I trust;" and rising, Mr. Graham placed his hand within Philip's. "I, for one, am convinced of your innocence, and shall labor hard to establish it. I have been home but a fortnight."

"Thank you," the young man answered, brokenly.

"I did not feel satisfied about the termination. I had said to myself, 'If Mr. Ashburton is the man I take him to be, he will come to my father and express some gratitude for his forbearance, or else his air of innocence will make itself felt. Or, if he dies, I shall always be glad that nothing was said.'"

"Perhaps you are aware, Mr. Graham, that my month's salary was sent for December, and a discharge — at least I was informed that it would be necessary to fill my place, which I could hardly dispute in a business point of view. I was down one day last March, and saw Mr. Bromley. Trade was very dull, as I well knew, and receiving not the slightest encouragement from him, I did not go again. I knew of no reason why I was expected to see your father. I questioned one of the clerks about Howard, and found that he had left with a fair reputation. I could only suppose that he had been fortunate enough in his venture to cover all deficiencies."

"It is a sad affair, that might have been explained with a few words, if any one had suspected the true state of the case. I do not wonder that you feel warmly, Miss Ashburton, and I can hardly blame your indignation. But in a large business like ours, the routine seldom stops for sentiment. Knowing what I did that evening, I was truly desirous of not adding to your pain. I saw that you placed implicit faith in your brother."

"And he was worthy of it," she answered, proudly.

"Will you not pardon my mistake? I shall do all in my power to make amends."

He held out his hand. Madge took it reluctantly. She had to crush down the bitterness of her soul. If this had come yesterday, before the fatal step! It was so hard to have faith, to believe in a possible good being evolved from this injustice.

"I cannot tell you how truly I regret the sorrow and trouble that have unwittingly been brought upon you by my clumsy endeavor. I must beg that some allowance be made for my father. When you come to have thirty or forty years of experience in business, you will naturally grow suspicious, and chary of believing the first story you hear. Young men are led astray in so many different ways, and the hope of replacing a little money looks so

fair to one in necessity! Some years ago we had quite a serious affair, and my father said then that he never would forgive the slightest dereliction from honesty. Since then I have interfered in two cases. The first one I shall never regret."

"But I do not see how Philip came to be suspected of all, and this Howard to be believed so implicitly," exclaimed Madge, still indignant.

"Because the error was in your brother's account, and not in his. Howard had charge of his books that day, and must have altered figures to suit himself. He took it at once to Mr. Bromley, and we three were all who knew of the fact. And although utterly surprised, I own that I did not suspect Howard in the slightest until after he had left. There was not a shadow of proof against him."

"I have still nothing but my word," said Philip, proudly.

"And if I tell you that I trust it implicitly, and ask you to come down to-morrow morning for further conference with my father, will you refuse me?"

Ward Graham's voice was full of earnest and manly pleading. He held out his hand to Philip.

"How sorry I am I can never tell you!"

Philip could not resist the cordial manner.

"I will be there at ten," he said. "At twelve I must report."

A strong shiver passed over Madge.

"You *have* enlisted, then?" Mr. Graham asked.

"Business was so dull. There seemed so little chance of anything else. Yet I believe I have had a fancy for it all along."

Philip's voice trembled a little in spite of his strong effort to be calm.

"And he had a substitute," exclaimed Madge.

"Then it is doubly heroic in him," returned Mr. Graham. "I do not believe any brave or honorable impulse is ever quite barren of fruit, though it may be delayed."

It seemed to Madge that she took a survey of him then for the first time. A rather grave but not unhandsome face, indicating refinement and culture, with a subtle, underlying strength. The eyes were a deep, soft gray, but the hair and beard nearly black. There was something honorable and tender in the expression, and she trusted in spite of her wounded pride and sore heart.

"To-morrow, then," he said, lingering in the doorway, taking a careless glance at the parlor, that looked so pretty and cosy.

Madge and Philip ran up stairs again to Mrs. Ashburton's room, and there the story was told over in such a tumultuous fashion that it was some time before the listeners could make beginning or end of it.

"It is a mystery to me yet," declared Philip, "that I should have sent Madge upon such an errand, and then forgotten it completely. I do not remember even being troubled about Howard during the first of my illness. It is all a blank to me, after my return earlier than usual one day with an excruciating headache."

"And yet we thought you better the next morning, and you *were* rational," said Jessie, much perplexed.

"I wonder how Madge came to keep the secret."

"I believe it is the only one I ever did keep," replied Madge, tearfully. "The thought and terror of your dying took possession of us all, to the exclusion of everything else; and if it recurred at all, it was only as a wandering fancy of your brain, especially when Dr. Conway said the disease had been lurking in your system for weeks.

"But I wonder that you did not speak of it afterwards."

"I did just refer to it once, but I saw that you had no recollection of it, and I was afraid that you would be sorry you had sent me on a foolish and useless errand. We had so much to bear that I did not want to add a straw's weight. But if I never had gone —"

"No," returned Jessie; "I think the going was very

fortunate. Suppose, in addition to the illness, this terrible suspicion had fallen upon us! Weeks must have elapsed before Philip could have disproved it."

"If ever. And a good name is not so easily regained."

"But it doesn't take the pain out of the hardest and bitterest," sobbed Madge afresh. "O, Philip! if you only *had* waited! if you had not enlisted to-day! Why does God let all these things happen?"

"My darling, hush," said her mother, softly.

"But it is so hard to believe these events are for the best when one suffers from them!"

Very true; and perhaps the eyes of nineteen are not so clear and comprehensive.

Yet there was very substantial cause for gratitude, and no one felt it more keenly than Mr. Ashburton. That Philip should have rested for months under this suspicion was bitter indeed, but it might have gone on for a lifetime, cropping out now and then to his disadvantage, like the stab of an unseen enemy.

And the father had a hope in his heart that he hardly dared express, or breathe in anything but prayer. Perhaps they all unconsciously shared it.

"I shall have to wait all day before I hear a word of good news," said Madge, disconsolately, the next morning

"But it is a comfort to think of it even. It seems to me like a glimpse of sunshine over our shady path!"

"Trust you for finding the brightness, Jessie;" and Madge almost smiled.

But Philip came for her in the afternoon, and his face was as radiant as this summer day.

"O," she exclaimed, with a glad cry. "I believe I can guess it all. You will not leave us!"

"No, I am not to leave you—at least, I think the matter will be arranged."

"O, it must, it must! And Mr. Graham?"

"We have had a very thorough explanation. Mr. Ward

Graham is the noblest man I have ever met, and his patience is not only tender, but grand. Still, there *was* a false entry in my books, and the money appeared to have been taken on the day that I went home ill. No one can remember whether Howard came back or not. Just at that juncture we were crowded with business, and getting orders ready for young Mr. Graham. It is one of the things which seemed to have happened by accident, and might not occur once in a thousand times."

"So it had to fall upon you!"

"And it may be the means of greater good fortune. We cannot always see the end from the beginning."

"But I cannot excuse Howard's treacherous and dishonest act," Madge replied, vehemently.

"No. Sin must always be sin, and its consequences bitter. Still, God can turn the results into useful lessons. And, Madge, the virtue lies not in bearing the evils which our own sins have brought upon us, but in taking patiently the buffeting we receive for the faults of others."

"But we cannot, in every case," she said, decisively.

"That is one of the lessons we are to learn, little sister."

Madge gave him a quick, questioning look.

"Are you thankful that it happened?"

"No, my darling; but I am glad the evil has been no worse. We had a long talk this morning. Madge, you do not know how great the temptation is to most young men to make a little money. They see others doing it so easily — it is one of the misfortunes of our present state of finance. I never was what you might call intimate with Howard, yet now and then he would mention the fact of having made a hundred or two dollars, and sometimes, when *we* were sorely pressed for money, I used to wonder how it would do for me to try. But after dear father's noble example, I could never have touched a penny which did not belong to me."

"O, I hope not!" with a quick grasp of his arm.

"Then I was tempted many a time while with Mr. Bradley — not to use his money, but to do some things which were not strictly honorable. And if I had been fortunate here, this explanation never could have happened, and the Grahams would always have considered me a dishonest man, suffered to prosper through their generosity. Now I have made two of the best friends a young man can have."

"But Howard goes scot free, and is successful, I suppose."

Philip smiled a little. "You cannot seem to give him up, Madge?"

"No;" and she laughed too. "Like the story books, I want virtue rewarded and vice punished."

"That is one of the things that we must leave with God."

"Philip," with a sudden impulse, "how good you are! I believe you are always thinking about it now."

"When a man has gone down to the brink of the dark river, he comes to view matters with different eyes," Philip answered, gravely. "I find myself full of evil, but I *am* trying to cling to the sure guide and support."

They walked a little way in silence; then Madge said, in a rather subdued tone, —

"You have not told me what the prospect really is."

"O, we forgot our text — didn't we? I do believe the elder Mr. Graham is convinced of my honesty, and they have offered me one of the best positions, with a salary of sixteen hundred dollars this year; and Mr. Ward will see about getting me another substitute. There is the seven hundred dollars bounty money, you know, and he thinks for three hundred dollars more, we might obtain one. They believe the war will be ended before another year."

"O, I hope it will. And I am very, very glad —"

Her voice trembled over tears.

"It seems as if the dawn might be breaking over us at last."

She did not reply. It had been a long and dreary night, with even the watchmen's voices hushed.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW FRIEND.

PHILIP's release was obtained without any special difficulty, and he took his place in the old establishment once more. Mr. Bromley had left some months previous, having accepted, in connection with a friend, a large government contract. Consequently there was no embarrassment for Philip.

"I should like to ask Mr. Graham up here to tea," he said one evening to Jessie. "He has expressed a desire to see father, and become acquainted with the rest of you."

"Why not? We should be glad to have him come, I am sure. I have not seen him at all, remember."

"Sure enough," exclaimed Madge. "And since he has become a kind of hero in our estimation, we ought to know more of him. He is rich — isn't he, Philip?"

"I should think so. They have been one of the fortunate houses during the war."

Mrs. Ashburton glanced at her daughter. What if there had been something besides Mr. Graham's interest in Philip?

And yet it seemed as if Madge was hardly bright enough or pretty enough to attract any person's attention at a glance. Not that she had faded, but the toil and care had dimmed the

"something sweet
That follows youth with flying feet."

The spirit, and brilliancy, and vivacity flashed but rarely now.

Had she grown old before her time? Had the love that once appeared the sun of her life proved a burden? For now Charlie Westlake said nothing about a return. And Mrs. Ashburton sighed.

"How old is Mr. Graham?" asked Jessie.

"About forty," replied Madge, musingly.

"Forty!" and Philip laughed.

Madge glanced up in amazement.

"Why, Mr. Graham, senior, is not much beyond fifty."

"Well, I never thought of him as being young."

"He may be past thirty, and looks neither young nor old, but has a grave, sweet face. Why, I believe his eyes are wonderfully like Jessie's, but his hair is much darker."

Mr. Graham set all criticisms and doubts at rest by accepting the invitation. It was during the first week of Madge's vacation, when she felt very lazy and listless. There had not been any little festival suppers since the time of Charlie Westlake, and it seemed quite a new undertaking.

Mr. Ashburton had become so blind that he could barely distinguish between light and darkness. Yet as this avenue of the senses closed slowly, a clearer spiritual vision appeared to become his. The doubts and despair that threatened to overwhelm him at one time had vanished, and the twilight through which he walked became illuminated with that all-glorious Sun of Righteousness. Consenting, like a little child, to be led by the Father's hand, he no longer stumbled over thorns. Faith resumed her crown and sceptre.

And with this repose of soul had come a decided improvement in his physical health. Sweet, patient, uncomplaining, he seemed to make the central point in the household. For now they rarely spoke of Home Nook. The old hopes had been laid away with reverent hands, perhaps never to be called to a resurrection morning.

They heard from Eleanor at intervals. She had gone

to a German town to reside, and appeared to be living very quietly. Gerald did not intend to return until the war had ended.

Madge roused herself a little, and assisted Jessie in her preparations. It was to be very simple.

"We cannot give him grandeur and luxury; so it is not worth while to go beyond our usual fashion," she said. "I used to feel that one ought to do her best for a person of higher station, and you know how we did try for aunt Waltham! But now I am quite content to be considered poor."

Jessie smiled in her thoughtful way.

Their table was nearly all arranged before Philip came home. Both girls were in white—Madge with some deep velvety crimson roses at her throat, but Jessie with a knot or two of blue ribbon. She was not so tall as Madge, and there still hung about her the soft shadows of a hardly outgrown childhood.

She came in to be introduced—rather shyly it must be confessed, for she was brought in contact with so few strangers. But the cordial smile, like a rift of sunshine, dispelled her slight awe at once.

There was something about Mr. Graham that went to each heart. The refinement of a gentleman, the ease and culture of society, and a reverent tenderness that could have its birth only in a pure and noble soul. Jessie was won by the deference he paid her father—a fine respect, that graced him as well as Mr. Ashburton.

And before the supper was half through, they began to consider him quite in the light of an old friend.

Afterwards they adjourned to the small garden, for the summer day was not yet ended.

"You are a wonderful florist," he said to Jessie, "only you have not sufficient scope for your talents. Flowers are a passion with me as well, but in the winter we have quite a conservatory."

"And Jessie has a few in the window," said Madge; "roses which she manages to coax into bloom, and late sweet violets, with three or four callas."

He told them of flowers he had seen abroad, and some curious South American plants. He understood their habits and needs wonderfully for a business man.

And somehow, there, in the tender falling twilight, they touched upon Home Nook. Not in any sense of loss or regret; they were too well bred for that; but in his delicate way he learned the story from shy Jessie and outspoken Madge, and gathered from the depths the sorrow and the brave patience with which they had borne it all.

After they came in, another discovery was made. Mr. Graham had known Gerald Copeland. That seemed to give him a stronger claim upon their friendship.

The evening ended with music. Mr. Graham possessed a rich, mellow tenor voice, and sang with Jessie while Madge played.

Just at the last, while they were lingering over some music quite apart from the others, he said to Jessie in a low tone, —

"I have to thank you for a very pleasant evening. I am glad to have met you all, and I can understand now the influences which have given your brother his peculiar nobleness and strength. Perhaps, too, I am gratified not to be mistaken in my first impression of him."

"O," she answered with a quick, fluttering underbreath, "we owe you so much!"

"Would you like to pay the debt?"

She flushed deeply, though the kind eyes were not intrusive.

"We cannot, Mr. Graham."

"In part by allowing me the place of a friend. It seems as if I owed you and yours something, as well, but there are favors which are never burdensome."

Jessie understood. It was as if a strong oak had grown

up in a single night in the midst of swaying, clinging vines. No such friend had ever come to them before. Was it a steady star dawning in the sky of better days?

They all talked him over afterwards in their pleasant, home-like fashion.

"I like him better than I fancied I should," confessed Madge. "I cannot exactly tell how it came, but I believe I held a little grudge against him. And, mamma, I really could not help thinking, if Nelly had married such a man, how much better contented we should all be."

Unwittingly, Madge had touched a tender chord. As the years went on, they felt less satisfied with Eleanor's marriage. Indeed, the summer with aunt Waltham seemed to have drifted her beyond the old home moorings. Was she happy? Alas, they could not tell!

There came to the Ashburtons, after this, a feeling of hope, as if the worst of adversity had been overpast. Clement was prospering again, and Philip in a situation to take care of them all. He even proposed that Madge should give up the school.

"No," she said, decisively. "I am not needed at home, and five hundred dollars will do a good deal for us."

"But you do require rest."

"Which my vacation will give me—just enough, and no more. Philip, I sometimes think I am troubled with a restless spirit. I could not sit down and be quiet, alter over my old dresses, tend flowers, and fill my hands with the small duties of household life. And though I did rebel at first, and do not like teaching yet, still it gives employment to brain and energy, and keeps down the secret dissatisfaction."

"My darling, I wish you could find peace and rest."

"I am not miserable—don't fancy that;" but the tone was rather sharp. "It is only the crudeness and effervescence of youth. Did not Mr. Graham say, a few evenings since, that we grew broader, and deeper, and richer in soul as the years passed over us?"

He kissed the throbbing lips. If it had not been for Charlie Westlake, he fancied she could drift into a peaceful and quiet haven.

She *was* rather glad to get back to school again — the old groove to which she had become accustomed, even if she did not fit.

Mr. Graham dropped in now and then. It brightened their lives wonderfully, this fresh contact with vigor that was not crude, and refinement that was not weak. There were reading aloud, pleasant conversation, and music. Mr. Ashburton enjoyed it all so much!

And then the calm tide was broken when they were least looking for it. An unexpected wave drifted in the wreck that had gone out a pleasure-boat under shining skies. There had been a crunch of keel on jagged rocks, but the pilot, clinging to the fragments, had steered straight on through storm and darkness, knowing one friendly port that would never be closed to the worn wayfarer.

This was what they all felt one chill and drizzling October night, when their door opened to Eleanor. The mourning robe and long black veil told the story, and the baby in her arms appealed to them with a peculiar sense of desolation and pity.

Madge uttered a cry of surprise and dismay, but the mother's tender arms received her, clasping her to a heart which had never wavered — never could.

“O, mother! mother!”

Such a sad, yearning cry, coming from depths long repressed! — a history of wordless pain and anguish, of glad return, even in the sorest humiliation.

They crowded round her. Familiar faces and voices — long, loving kisses — clasps that would hold forever, in true and unfaltering affection.

“My child! Thank God!”

It was all the mother could utter.

"I felt that I must come. If I have brought you sorrow and trouble, forgive me. I had no place of refuge."

"God knows how welcome you are, Nelly."

It was Philip's clear, strong voice, good to hear. To her, famishing for familiar sounds, the welcome was full of indescribable joy.

"O, papa!"

She kissed the trembling lips, the sightless eyes from whose gaze she was shut out. Home with them all once more.

The baby's cry, strange and sweet, broke on the sad rapture of meeting.

"I came so suddenly," Eleanor said, in broken, quivering tones, like a sound wildly shaken about by the wind, "I could not wait to send a message."

Jessie took the little one in her arms. A sweet face, framed in with straggling golden curls, and large eyes that shrank away from the light in infantile terror.

Madge unfastened Eleanor's bonnet and shawl. A still handsome woman, looking young for her five and twenty years — changed, and yet the same.

"O, baby! don't cry. We are safe home at last."

And even with the words, Eleanor Copeland buried her face on her mother's bosom, and sobbed with an almost hysterical passion.

"My darling, you, too, are home with those who love you, who have mourned your absence. Be comforted, my child."

They soothed her back to comparative tranquillity, but she was exhausted with the journey and the excitement. Mrs. Ashburton laid her on the sofa.

"It is so good to be home once more, and to find you unchanged! Four years!"

The pale lips quivered. They had not all been happy years to her.

"There is so much to tell! I missed the last mail,

though I did not think of coming then. Poor baby! we have had a weary time; but we are safe, thank God! Have I surprised you all beyond belief?"

For the girls and Philip were still watching her with wondering glances.

"It is strange to think of your being here," returned Madge, "and I am wondering if we shall find it a dream to-morrow morning! But, O, what a lovely baby, Nelly!"

"She is tired, poor little thing. She was quite sick at first. And you — like her?"

Eleanor uttered the words timidly.

"Like her!"

There was something in the tone that went to the depths of Eleanor's heart; for during the passage she had continually questioned the wisdom of this step. What right had she to add to their burdens, when, in her youth and strength, she had refused to bear any for them?

"O, Madge, Jessie, mamma! I felt as if I must come, even if I died at your feet. And yet it is my bitterest punishment that I must add to your cares. For baby and I are alone in the world, with nothing save poverty for our inheritance."

"My darling, where should you come but to your mother's heart?"

"I cannot talk to-night, and it is a long story. But, O, to be home once more!"

Jessie hushed the little one in her arms; but though they tried to talk on indifferent subjects, each heart was too full of surprise and newly-awakened tenderness to render the effort very successful.

"You called her Margaret," Jessie said, referring to the baby.

"Yes, after mamma. It seemed like a glimpse of home. But with her German nurse she was always Greta."

"An odd, pretty, and very German-like diminutive. O Nelly, there is nothing but poverty, and yet I often think it is not so hard when shared with one another."

"There are many severer trials," she answered, quietly.

At last they took Eleanor up to her own room. The two girls had shared it latterly, as they rarely had any guests to entertain.

"My baggage will come to-morrow," she said. "I could not wait for it. Jessie, you will find a few necessary articles in my satchel."

Little Greta made no resistance to her aunt Jessie's loving offices, being too sleepy to demur, and quite accustomed to strangers.

"Everything looks so natural," said Eleanor, "I might have gone yesterday for any change there is here; and yet it seems an age ago, judging by myself. Only — poor papa —"

They kissed her many times, and left her to herself at last to cry softly over her fatherless child, and thankful that there had been a place of refuge for her in her desperate need.

Poor Nelly! Their unspoken presentiment had not misnamed her.

Madge was full of excitement, and could hardly sleep and the worst was, to go away the next morning with just the merest glimpse, enough to satisfy her that the vision of the previous evening had been true.

Eleanor Copeland felt weary and languid after her fatiguing journey. It was such a luxury to enjoy this rest and quiet, to be ministered unto by loving hands, to hear her child's fond little laugh and soft voice answering the caresses showered upon her, and to have the familiar faces around her.

By degrees she went over the story of her brief life, that had been crowded with anxiety, and pain, and shame, and at the last bordering so closely upon poverty that she had been compelled to toil for herself and her child. In all their thoughts of her, there had been no fear like this — the bitter fruit of aunt Waltham's worldly faith and doctrines made manifest.

"I ought never to have married Gerald Copeland," she confessed to her mother. "Even then I felt that there was a secret want, that I debased the teaching of my previous life. But I *was* a coward. I shrank from poverty and hardships. I thought this step would smooth the way for us all; but I should not have taken it had I known the truth. And Mr. Copeland would not have asked me to marry him but for one assurance of aunt Waltham — that I was to be her heir."

Eleanor's face flushed deeply in her bitter humiliation.

"O, my child! to be bartered in this most sacred undertaking of a woman's life! I should not have so weakly yielded my right —"

"No, mamma, you shall not blame yourself. It was my punishment for wilfully blinding my own eyes. Yet I fancied that I could and did love him. If we had remained at home, it might have been better. His fatal weakness was gaming, though I think he played little when we were first at Paris. I was very happy then in the excitement of pleasure and new scenes. But after Greta was born, I could not go with him continually, and he sought other friends, returned to his old passion, and played heavily, nearly always losing. What fatal fascination impels a man to continue such a course? Then came the news of aunt Waltham's death. I saw that he was dreadfully disappointed, but I did not know the truth until months afterwards. One night, maddened to frenzy by his losses, and having drunk deeply to drown the consciousness, he taunted me with marrying him under the false pretence of being heir to a fortune. O, you cannot realize my shame and dismay, because I seemed to gather from certain past evidences that it was true. And yet she had told no falsehood. Everything she had left did come to me as her heir, only she had led him to believe that it was a large amount. I was indignant, and perhaps retorted too warmly. But I felt so outraged! That she, in

the guise of best and dearest friend, had bargained me as an article of merchandise ! and that he, pretending to love, had looked farther, with mercenary eyes ! And then I asked myself how much better and purer my motives had been. Not absolutely base and selfish, perhaps, but still lacking all nobler impulses. I saw myself as I was, a hideous mockery, and bowed in the dust, accepting the destiny I had chosen. The pang and the humiliation were terrible indeed.

“Gerald felt ashamed of his violence, though he did not express any contrition in words. For the first time in my life, I believe, I prayed earnestly for strength to do my whole duty. I resolved not to forget for an instant that I was his wife ; that if I was disappointed and mistaken, he felt himself wronged as well. Indeed, we might have reached a better and truer understanding but for his mad passion. He made a few weak efforts to overcome it, but they were as straws in the fierce current. And having reached the end of his fortune, he seemed helpless for any other course. For months we drifted along on that most uncertain sea, at times tolerably prosperous, then on the verge of want. He was too proud to return to America, or to make an appeal to his friends. And then I realized the necessity for a higher source of action than a creed of harmless and pleasant morality. I was so utterly adrift that at first I almost feared to turn to God in the depths of my anguish.

“Yet I knew that I must rescue myself and my child from the degradation that was rapidly surrounding us. I succeeded in obtaining a situation in a school at Brussels, but the life was too monotonous for him. He went away in a fit of restlessness, and for more than three months I had not seen him.”

“You were not with him when he died ?” Mrs. Ashburton asked.

“O, mamma ! There is the bitterest shame and the an-

guish. He was at Frankfort. And the cause was a quarrel at play — he having accused his opponent of cheating.”

Eleanor covered her face with her hands. Well might she say shame.

“He was severely wounded, and taken to a hospital. Three days after, as he lay dying, a letter was sent to me, and delayed nearly a week on its route. I answered immediately, but mine was returned unopened, with one word written across the envelope — ‘Dead.’ My term had just closed. I found that by selling a few trinkets I still possessed, I could return home or go to Frankfort. Gerald was buried, and I should be there friendless and penniless. So I resolved to start immediately for New York. If it was not wise, it appeared the best step to me then.”

Eleanor glanced at her mother as if she almost feared that she should not meet with approval.

“We shall have to leave it in God’s hands, my child. It has been a thorny path indeed.”

Yet perhaps not without good fruit. For in those hours of tempest-tossed bitterness, with blackest skies above, and storms on every side, she had let go her own pride and strength, and cried unto One mighty to save. Like a spirit moving on the face of the turbulent waters, a hand had been stretched out to her, and, feeble, helpless, she had clung to it with the soul of a child, with the faith that here indeed was her only refuge.

Henceforward there would be no weak shrinkings from duty. Once within the ark, she could leave the struggle and questioning with God. He knew best what burden she was able to bear, and he had promised his grace as sufficient. She would hew out no more broken cisterns of her own, content to trust to the wiser guidance.

It was wonderful how soon they all settled themselves to the fact of Eleanor’s return. By degrees they came to know the particulars of the unfortunate marriage ; but the

world heard nothing beyond the mention of Gerald Copeland's death at Frankfort, after having dissipated the most of his fortune, and that his widow had come back to her family and friends. A few of the Copeland relatives made a call of condolence.

CHAPTER XVII.

THORNS AND ROSES.

THEY all felt the change in Eleanor. It was as if she no longer held a life apart from theirs. Her delicacy and fine sensitiveness were not, as hitherto, aids to pride, but had in them the ring of a true and noble refinement.

Jessie was pleased with the cordial manner in which she and Mr. Graham accepted each other. For he had come to be a regular visitor, a pleasant friend, with whom they could exchange thoughts and beliefs, who brought into their circle glimpses of the true beauty and pleasure of the outer world. Now and then, he took the girls to a musical entertainment, or some fine lecture. If anything, he appeared most familiar with Madge; but Mrs. Ashburton could not feel easy in her conscience until she knew that he fully understood Madge's peculiar position.

Baby Margaret supplied the one lack in the house. From the first, she took a strange and tender fancy to her grandfather, as if in some dim way she understood the loss and loneliness. Not a brilliant or remarkable child, but quaint, affectionate, and overflowing with sweet, childish prattle.

Eleanor Copeland took up the battle of life with no false pride, no shrinking or fear. She had outlived all that. With her fine musical talent and a voice that had always been remarkable for depth and sweetness, she was not long in finding a place.

She had youth and health still unimpaired, and a courage which seemed to inspire them all; a nature late in blossoming, but one to bear golden fruit through many a year to come.

They talked sometimes of the old days and the old home, the dreams yet unfulfilled. In two years more, Clement expected to return; but before a twelvemonth had ended, Dr. Conway considered it quite possible that Mr. Ashburton could be restored to sight.

"Mother," exclaimed Philip one evening, as they were alone, "when has Madge heard from Charlie Westlake?"

"Not in some time, I believe. Indeed, he has not been a very regular correspondent the past winter."

"Do you think she cares much for him now?"

There was a peculiar anxiety in Philip's thoughtful eyes.

"Have you — heard anything?"

"His name is in to-day's passenger list."

"Well," said Mrs. Ashburton, with a rapid breath.

"He is married, mother. It was Mr. and Mrs. Charles Westlake, Mrs. Catherine Westlake."

"O!" and the mother uttered a cry of pain.

"Somehow, I have half suspected this all along. I do believe he loved Madge sincerely at the time, and meant to be true, but there was not sufficient depth nor strength in the regard. And now, after these years of waiting, after taking the sweetest and most hopeful part of her life —"

"My poor, poor darling! Was I unwise or lacking in prudence? I hesitated to consent, but he appeared so much in earnest, and certainly did act nobly then."

"O, mother! how much suffering the wrong-doing of one person entails upon the many innocent! It hardly seems right to me. We shall have to pay in pain for his heedlessness in speaking at first, and his selfishness in seeking something that looked more promising."

"It is his cousin."

"Yes, I am quite sure. Her name was not among the passengers."

"There was a rumor to this effect some time ago. Jessie thought best not to mention it."

"Poor Madge! Mother, our girls seem to be unfortunate," said Philip, sadly. "Do you think she will feel it very keenly? I wish she, too, had become interested in some other person."

"I fancy that Madge's affections are not easily transferred. She has grown more reticent than her childhood promised, but her feelings are strong and deep. This will be a severe blow, even though she has said little about him latterly."

"How shall we tell her?"

Ah! how confess this treachery and unfaithfulness? How stab one so dear to them all?

"I do not know," Mrs. Ashburton returned, tremulously. "Perhaps we had better wait and be quite certain."

"I am sure of it now. Then she has not heard regularly from him for six months or more. And, after all, mother, this is such a common event. Hundreds of young men do it. I sometimes wonder if there is any truth or tenderness in human nature! Yet one would hardly have suspected him of such villany!"

"I do not suppose that it was a deliberate breaking of faith. By degrees he has outgrown the old regard, and allowed his soul to centre around a new fancy. And we hardly know what persuasions have been brought to bear upon him. Mrs. Westlake, you know, did not cordially approve, and May had a large fortune."

"Yes, that was the under-current. But O, how base and unmanly it seems to sell one's soul for gold!"

"It may not have been that, altogether. Miss Rossiter was a pretty girl, and what the world calls sweet, winsome, and not unamiable."

"Mother, you find too many excuses for him! It is an act of cowardly treachery! If he had told her six months ago, it would have appeared much more manly."

"I only desire to extend a Christian forbearance towards his fault or sin, that will cause us much pain and anxiety,

and perhaps cast a shadow over our darling's life. My feeling against him is, perhaps, too bitter, Philip."

The son had only to glance in his mother's face to see the struggle going on within — natural sympathy and indignation, against the wish not to judge too harshly.

"I believe I shall take some pains to see him. This is too cruel a blow to let pass in silence."

"Philip, my dear, there are some wrongs best left un-avenged. Rather let us try to comfort her, to help her bear her burdens."

"How can we?"

"Recrimination will hardly lighten the pain, and one sometimes utters hasty words in such an interview that had better be forever left unsaid. Let that part remain in God's hands, to be dealt with as he sees fit. If we can bring any brightness into her life —"

"O, if she never had loved him! Mother, what is the use of all this pain and suffering? I cannot see why God should send it."

"Perhaps to render us more careful in our dealings with others. As we go along, these mysteries are unveiled, and though we may not understand at the moment, the years will bring a solution to our darkest problems."

"That is a lesson we hardly needed. Both Clement and I possess too much manliness, I hope, to trifle with any woman's regard."

"God grant that you may."

"But what are we to do?" he asked, after a pause.

"Nothing at present. I may take Eleanor and Jessie into counsel before anything is said. I feel lost and uncertain myself. It may have been imprudent to consent so readily —"

"I am sure you *did* try him to some extent. When I think it all over, it does not seem as if Charlie Westlake ever could be so base! O, if it never had been at all!"

Mrs. Ashburton sighed as she called up Charlie West-

lake's bright, young face. Still, admitting that it was more weakness than deliberate sin, would not lighten the pain in store for poor Madge.

Philip returned to the parlor. Mr. Graham was there, and they were chatting, merrily, even to Eleanor, who was really much more of a companion to the girls than she had been before her marriage. He studied them as he had scarcely dared hitherto. How bright and winsome Madge grew with every word, and how Mr. Graham watched the quick flashes of color, and seemed to listen with an inward snile to the soft, rich voice! Ah! if that dream could come true! Mr. Graham was a man quite capable of going beyond his own immediate circle for a wife, if any fancy strong enough should draw him.

Eleanor had obtained a number of music pupils already. She hardly knew how much of this she owed to Mr. Graham, for he never made himself conspicuous in kindly deeds. She found her few years of foreign life and correct pronunciation of both French and Italian very much in her favor.

The next morning, Mrs. Ashburton confided to her the sorrow overshadowing Madge. They had scarcely mentioned the Westlakes' name since her return, as there had been so many more apparently important subjects of conversation.

"How very, very unfortunate!" Eleanor replied. "But you might have known that a poor daughter-in-law would be most distasteful to Mrs. Westlake. And yet I hardly see how you could have acted or decided differently," she added, in a quick tone, lest her mother might think she blamed her. "It was a most unwise step on Madge's part."

"The poor child realized nothing besides the pleasure and the love. I made them wait until the regard appeared true and enduring on both sides; but our human eyes cannot see the end from the beginning."

"Dear mamma, how much pain we have caused you,

even from the best of motives ! I used to think, when my marriage was in contemplation, that I should be able to do something for the others which might lighten the general burden ; but how miserably I failed ! And that Madge should come to sorrow so early in life ! ”

“ I may have been at fault — ”

“ No, mamma, you shall not blame yourself. Madge was wilful and headlong in those days. ”

“ But she gave up so sweetly in this matter ! Whatever we thought best she agreed with immediately. It was partly because of this that I did not break it off wholly ; and then I never could determine how much right I had to decree separation to two fond young hearts. ”

“ It is a sad thing, ” returned Eleanor, “ and we can only help her bear it. Going over the path to look for mistakes will not take the keen edge from the pain. ”

They were most tender and considerate. It really seemed to Madge that they were all trying to spoil her with care and tenderness. And because she did not wish to appear ungrateful, she allowed herself to be happier than her wont.

But the secret could not be kept forever. A letter from Hetty Bright detailed the home-coming at length, the elegance and beauty of the bride, the great state of Mrs. Westlake, and the grandeur of the receptions. All Riverside was discussing the event.

“ I should hardly have known Mr. Westlake, ” she wrote. “ It will not do to call him Charlie now, for he has outgrown all the boyishness. He is thinner and paler than when he went away, and there is a grave, grand look about him that seems so strong and manly ; yet one misses the past brightness. I have a queer, old woman’s fancy that this fashionable wife is not quite the companion for him. You know he never set any great store by all the Madam’s show and parade, and he looks now as if he was tired of it all, and worthy of better things. Ah, my

dear, how many lives seem to go awry from some hidden knot or gnarl in the centre, that no one is able to see ! ”

The letter was lying in Jessie's basket when Madge came home, rather earlier than usual.

“O,” she exclaimed, “another long gossiping volume from that good old soul, Hetty Bright ! I can always tell the queer, crabbed handwriting. May I read it, Jessie ? ”

Jessie placed her hand over it, playfully.

“O, if it contains secrets — But you might tell me part, at least.”

Jessie repeated the most unimportant tidings, with a trifle of embarrassment, it must be confessed.

“Why do you watch me so, Nelly ? ” queried Madge, rather nervously, bestowing a quick glance upon them all. “What is the matter ? ”

No one answered, though each made a slight effort. Some time Madge must know, but who could tell her ?

“O,” she exclaimed, “you have heard something that concerns me ! ”

“Mrs. Westlake's family have returned ; ” Mrs. Ashburton made answer, slowly.

A flash of rare bright joy shone up in Madge's face like a sudden burst of sunshine. It had no answering gleam in those around, and it seemed for an instant as if her heart stood still, while she read the tidings as if written in a tracery of flame everywhere.

“And Charlie — O, you need not tell me the rest.”

With a cry of anguish she buried her face in her hands. Something had been wrenched from her soul, and her whole being rose up in resistance. She had waited patiently, she had hoped steadfastly, she had believed with all her soul that whatever else God took out of her life, he would leave this.

“My darling,” said her mother, softly.

“O, mamma ! ” was the reply, in a quivering voice, that showed how deep the wound had gone, “don't say any-

thing to me just now. I feel as if I could not bear even the tenderest word."

With that she went out of the room, in a weak, unsteady fashion. Each heart longed to comfort, but silence was best.

"It is a hard lesson for one so young," Eleanor remarked, with a sigh. "It seems strange that such a burden should fall to the lot of Madge. We used to think her so changeable and volatile in the old days, that I can hardly understand her loyalty through a long engagement; and it would seem as if she had just the nature to call in pride to aid her in any extremity, or, at least, to pretend indifference."

"No," replied Jessie; "Madge is too honest. Her feelings are very strong. Each day, I think, less comes to the surface. I often wish she was the bright, careless Madge of old."

"I am not sure but that sorrow and trouble bring out the strongest elements in our natures," said Eleanor. "Prosperity may develop certain fine and noble phases, but the positive currents of the soul answer oftenest to some severe shock."

"And yet how pleasant it is to be happy! I sometimes wonder if those who are mercifully shielded from sorrows give thanks every day."

"There are very few lives without some touch of bitterness," said Eleanor, sadly.

Mrs. Ashburton felt the truth of the trite remark keenly. How many peaceful, happy years there had been to her life, when she really had been the envy of her friends! And yet were there any of them who would take her sorrows now?

Madge came down to supper as usual. She had a hard, strained look about the eyes, but there were no traces of tears. And afterwards she went to the parlor and forced herself to take up the social duties of the evening. She

felt that all of life must be gone through with, even if the vanished light no longer lent a glory to her path; so she would not even allow herself an hour of weakness.

For the blow had not been altogether unexpected. Latterly she had believed against hope, against her better judgment, simply because desire was so strong. She could not endure to hear her recreant lover blamed; so she chose rather to forego the pleasure of love and sympathy.

Only her mother ventured upon any words of comfort, tacitly blaming herself for having allowed the fancy to ripen into love, when there seemed so little prospect of fruition.

"No, mamma, I do not see where you could have helped or hindered," Madge made answer. "It looked so fair and sweet then, and I was so ready to believe! I did not fully understand the wide gulf between wealth and poverty, or the possibility of change. But it is all done past recall, and there is nothing now but to gather up the fragments and go on, making the best of what is left. But never think it was your fault."

It was well, perhaps, that something came to engross their attention and turn the channel of their thoughts—an event so utterly unexpected that Mrs. Ashburton was bewildered by the first tidings that came from her husband. Ward Graham had asked his permission to endeavor to win Jessie.

"I had a fancy that it was Madge," said Philip, in the utmost surprise; "and from the very first I regretted that miserable Charlie Westlake business so bitterly, for I knew that it would always stand in the way. But, O, we never could give Jessie into better hands."

"So your father feels."

"And I am more than thankful that one of the girls is to be happy. Why, it is really magnificent!" warming into a bright smile. "Mr. Graham has considerable fortune of his own, besides the business interest, and I am delighted to see one man above the Westlake scruples."

"You must forget your bitterness."

"I cannot, when I look at poor Madge, with her pale, grave face. She will not breathe a complaint, but the wound rankles in her soul. I wish she had sufficient pride to shake it off. He is not worthy of all that devotion."

"We can seldom measure our pain by the event which caused it," was the sad reply.

Madge, in turn, expressed her amazement.

"I never thought of Jessie at all," she said, "but kept wishing that Eleanor was beginning her life, instead of bowing at the end of the octave. I am so glad! for Jessie deserves it all, and more."

As for Jessie, it seemed the most improbable thing in the world to her, and Mr. Graham really had to make an effort to convince her of the truth. She pleaded her surprise, her unfitness for the station his wife must occupy, her duties to those around her, and the lack of graces and accomplishments.

He listened to the soft, pleading voice, and watched the downcast, tremulous eyelids.

"My little girl, suppose I were to tell you that I was the best judge of what I most needed," he said, with a grave, amused smile. "I have been studying you since the evening I first came to supper, and I think I have found what I most desire — a woman who will help me live aright, whose aims and wishes are not all of earth, earthy. I want a companion for my soul in its more serious duties, as well as for moments of pleasure and enjoyment; for the grand and earnest truths, as well as for the glimpses of passing fancy. And, in turn, I wish to share all your cares and burdens. I want to have only one heart and mind between us."

Jessie raised her eyes shyly. To be the chosen companion of such a man — were they both dreaming?

"Your father has promised me a son's place in the household that I have come to esteem and admire, and

you must not shut me out. Although there have been few real sorrows in my life, I think I am not incapable of comprehending them. Can you not trust me until you know me better?"

What could she do but acquiesce? She had appreciated his kindness to Philip, and the straightforward manner in which he had repaired the so nearly fatal mistake. Learning to love him looked like no hard task in her eyes — if she only were worthy.

"It is I who ought to hesitate," he said, "and shrink from asking so much. My first youth is past, though I hope never to grow old in soul; but the disparity between our ages is something to be considered —"

"I did not think of that," was her quick reply. "It seems as if I outgrew girlhood long ago."

"Only to yourself;" and he smiled again. "One of my dearest pleasures will be in bringing it back to you."

"Can it come back?" she said, not doubtfully, but in a kind of wonder. For there had been so much walking through shady paths since then.

"Yes, sweet and joyful. It is all in your soul. You have only to take the love, not fearing to try it, or to use it to the uttermost. I want you to think of it like the other love in one way — all-sufficient. And I want you to give me all in return, that is, the first and best. It will seem strange for a while, I know, but you will come to understand the need and the comfort, the hidden meanings of life which unfold only to those who search for the sweetest of human treasures."

She was still a little dazzled at the completeness of it. In their lives they had become so used to looking for the "next;" the sorrow to follow the brief joy, the care to come after the restful breath.

He held the key to her hesitancy. The deeper experiences had been his, the steadfast truth, the tender patience, the wide outlook into things beyond to-day. It would all

come in time. He must not hurry her over the simple spelling, the short words of grace, and faith, and trust. Her soul was so clear and clean that it must not be blurred by any impatience.

He took her in his arms and kissed the forehead that was all one rosy flush, and the drooping eyelids that some day would not care to shut off the glory of a love given and confessed. Truly, it was worth waiting for!

He left her early, guessing rightly enough that the household would want a little tender confidence with her before he took his place at her side and preferred a claim which must, after all, become highest and best.

So she stole softly up stairs, where they were all gathered in Mrs. Ashburton's room, but paused on the threshold, her face crimsoned to its utmost, as a sense of the new life rushed over her. A strange new life indeed, different from Eleanor and Gerald's, from Madge and Charlie's.

Philip caught her and drew her forward.

"We are all waiting to congratulate you," he said, with a peculiar touch of tenderness.

"O, mamma!"

Mrs. Ashburton enfolded her within the shelter of her motherly arms.

And then Jessie felt a hand laid softly upon her head. She reached out hers to clasp the other.

"My darling," her father began, in a tone of deep emotion, "may God bless you in this new relation. Though I cannot see the face, I can trust the manly voice and honorable conduct. I am more than thankful to find life opening so fair before you, and I pray Heaven that no shadow may come to mar the promised joy."

He stooped and kissed the flushed face, and Jessie felt a tear drop on her cheek.

There was much seriousness in the rejoicing — partly out of a delicate regard for sad-hearted Madge, and partly from Jessie's natural gravity. They all felt, indeed, as if

gayety was something that went with the old life, and could have no place here.

"I wonder what aunt Waltham would say to this," interposed Eleanor. "She used to think society one of the indispensable adjuncts to a good marriage; and here is little Jessie, who has scarcely stirred from her Cinderella chimney-corner, engaged to a man whom the world courts daily, and would be proud to attract. And though I am too sadly wise now to believe wealth the great good of life, still I am glad, for Jessie's sake, that she will be raised above the trials of poverty. She has done her duty so nobly thus far, that her destiny seems doubly precious and satisfying to me."

"I stand in awe of it as if it were too grand for me," Jessie said, simply. "I wonder how I can ever fill the station."

"As you have filled this one," replied Madge; "by always doing the duty nearest. I cannot tell you how glad I am. And it is odd that I never thought of it, but Mr. Graham seemed so much older than we —"

"You are determined to make him out quite ancient," interrupted Philip, smiling. "He is just thirty-two — twelve years older than Jessie."

"And twelve years is too much, under ordinary circumstances; but I think we can trust him not to grow old too rapidly," said Mrs. Ashburton. "I should not wish to bias Jessie's inclination on the subject; indeed, I desire her to consider well before she decides —"

"The time for consideration is past, I am afraid," remarked Madge, with a touch of the old quaintness. "Jessie looks as if she had made her election."

"I did not think so much of that as of —"

"Well, Miss Tender Conscience?"

"O, Philip! do not laugh at me," she entreated, blushing painfully. "I did wish that we were rich again. I am almost sorry to take so much and give so little!"

"As if the love of a tender and noble woman was nothing!"

"I honor him for his choice," said Eleanor. "And, Jessie, you will find, in your contact with the world, that refinement and virtue are not always the prerogatives of wealth. There is much meanness, and baseness, and indigence of soul under a golden exterior. To my fancy, Mr. Graham has but few peers, and it is a high compliment for any woman to have won such a heart. But never think of your poverty in connection with him."

"No, Jessie, you need not experience any fear. I do believe Ward Graham one of the noblest of men. How oddly it has all come about! If Madge had not obeyed my crazy behest, we might never have had such a friend."

Madge smiled faintly, remembering that time of trial.

"To have made it a perfect romance, he ought to have fallen in love with her," said Jessie.

"But there are few perfect romances in this world, and it is all best as it is," returned the sweet, low voice, with its underlying strand of pain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A VEXED QUESTION.

THE Ashburtons settled themselves very quietly to the fact of Jessie's engagement. The spirit was one of tender thankfulness, rather than any intense delight. Circumstances gave it a kind of solemn sacredness. Eleanor's worldly betrothal, with its display and gratulations, and Madge's childish, eager promises, were so different from this!

But each day Jessie felt more secure and satisfied. When the first strangeness had worn off, and she gained courage for some shy confessions, they learned how much their souls and aims were alike—a something that did not lift them above the petty duties of life, but ennobled every common claim. For it is in these small things that we have our daily existence. Now and then there comes a great sorrow, or trial, or temptation; but it seems as if with the emergency new strength was provided. And the trivial incidents are perhaps the true test of character, the hourly patience and grace, the content with distasteful duties, the round that does become tiresome at times, when the soul longs to fly beyond its narrow orbit.

It appeared to Jessie, at first, as if leaving home would be quite an impossibility. How could they do without her? And then she found Eleanor taking her place, becoming an invaluable companion to their father. The wonders of the old world that she had often lingered over in a spirit of *ennui* or carelessness were as exhumed treasures to her, now that Mr. Ashburton loved to listen. She did endeavor to attach him to herself when she knew

that ere long he would be called upon to part with Jessie.

Madge kept to the calm tenor of her way. Even her mother was shut out of her great sorrow; indeed, she said steadily to herself that she would burden no one with it. Since she could not forget, she would lock it in her own soul, and have no long procession of pitying eyes.

And thus the spring came to them once again. Mr. Ashburton's operation would take place in the early autumn, as then a friend of Dr. Conway, an eminent oculist, would be home from Paris. This would necessitate change of abode for a month or two at least, and it was judged wisest that Mrs. Ashburton should be his attendant. Mr. Graham was deeply interested in this matter, and desired to have a son's right in deed and name before this occurrence.

There seemed no good reason why Jessie should refuse. Philip insisted that Madge should give up school the coming year, for she was growing vaguely shadow-like. Always well, she said; but there was a weariness sad to see, a shadow in the eyes that had once been so bright, a dreaminess and hesitation unlike the old promptness and energy.

One pleasant May afternoon they were gathered in the sitting-room, Eleanor reading aloud while Jessie and her mother sewed. Madge had just come home, and was lying listlessly on the sofa. Being the only unoccupied one, she answered the ring at the door bell. A small, slight figure, dressed in deep mourning, the tiny gloved hand looking like a child's as she raised her veil.

"Is Mr. Ashburton at home?"

Madge started. A face that, if not strictly beautiful, was still a marvel, with its pearly complexion, delicate features, and waves of fine, pale-golden hair.

"Mr. Ashburton!" she exclaimed in amaze.

It was so seldom that a stranger came for any one

besides Eleanor, that Madge unconsciously stared at her visitor.

"Does he not reside here?"

The voice had a peculiar sweetness of modulation. Indeed, the whole air of this strange little creature bespoke the extreme of refinement and cultivation.

"Yes; will you walk in?" replied Madge, collecting her scattered senses.

The folding-doors between the two rooms were wide open. Madge seated her visitor, and walked straight through.

"Papa," brushing the straggling locks from his forehead, "a lady wishes to see you."

He held out his hand, and Madge led him forward. The visitor rose, extended her slender fingers, and then questioned them both with her eyes.

"He is blind," Madge said, briefly. Somehow she had taken an unreasonable dislike to this stranger.

"Blind! O, Mr. Ashburton! Then you cannot recognize, even if you remembered me. I am Rose Stanhope."

Mr. Ashburton took a seat with quiet dignity.

"Your father —"

"Papa died at Genoa — in February last."

There was a peculiar atmosphere of awkwardness. Miss Stanhope's fingers worked nervously.

"Perhaps you prefer seeing papa alone?" Madge queried, presently.

"If you please."

A scarlet flush overspread the fair face as she uttered these words.

Madge rose and closed the doors between.

"Mr. Stanhope is dead," she began, in a low tone. "I wonder what can have happened?"

Eleanor glanced up thoughtfully, studying her mother's face.

"You know there was some —"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Ashburton softly. "We shall know in time."

They heard the murmur of the low talking, now and then rising to the verge of earnestness.

Jessie folded her sewing presently, and went to look after some housekeeping details. Little Greta woke from her nap, and climbed upon her mamma's knee. The spring sunshine began to quiver in the west, mingling with the rosy clouds of nightfall.

After a while they heard a faint stir and step. The hall door closed, and Madge flew to her father, who was standing at the back of his arm-chair, leaning his chin upon the palm of his hand.

"Wasn't it strange, papa?"

"Very strange, indeed. What does Miss Stanhope look like? She was a small, fair child—"

"And she is a small, fair woman. Papa, I believe I do not like her, and I can give no good reason, either."

"It is most peculiar and perplexing;" and a troubled expression crossed his face. "I suppose Philip remembers the circumstances of the—the failure. I was ill for so long, and I feel as if my ideas had never been quite clear upon the point."

Madge's pale brow was scarlet with a pained flush.

"There was nothing to be ashamed of," she replied, warmly. "Every day of my life I have been thankful that there was enough to pay all the debts."

"Let me lie on the sofa and rest until Philip comes in, when I will tell you all Miss Stanhope's story."

They saw that he had been unusually excited, for every limb trembled visibly.

Supper was on the table when Philip's cheery voice was heard in the hall; so they all went out, and no reference was made to the occurrence until the meal was nearly ended.

"Mr. Stanhope is dead, and his daughter has been here to-day," Mr. Ashburton said to his son.

"For what?" asked Philip, in amaze.

"Philip, was there ever any suspicion concerning Mr Stanhope? You looked into affairs while I was so ill."

"No — except —" and the young man flushed.

"Well?"

"I think now that some one had been unpardonably careless. There had been a good deal of money taken out of the firm, and the private accounts were at loose ends. Mr. Weir was quite dissatisfied, because three months before, he had considered the house in a very fair condition."

"I surely had taken out no unusual sums that year, yet I was much surprised when I learned our critical state. There had been some heavy losses —"

They all glanced at each other, remembering aunt Waltham's censures, thankful that their father could not see their questioning eyes.

"Does *she* accuse any one of wrong dealing?" asked Philip, indignantly.

"O, no, no! Yet her half-confessed suspicion and desire of restitution surprised and almost shocked me. She fancies that her father wronged me, though she did not say it in so many words, and she wishes to share her fortune with us. It is very large, I believe."

"Was it Mr. Stanhope's desire?"

"Not that I could learn."

"Did he leave any writing or message for you?"

"No. I asked her about this particularly. She said that he was a good deal troubled in his last days, and spoke of me frequently; so she fancied there might have been some mistakes in settling the business."

"Well, that is most peculiar," exclaimed Philip. "It seems to me that she must *know* more than she confesses."

"Papa," said Eleanor, slowly, "would you accept anything?"

Mr. Ashburton's pale face flushed, and an expression of something akin to disdain passed across his lips.

"My children," he returned in a tremulous voice, "I do not know that I have the sole right to decide. Through my carelessness or imprudence I brought misfortune upon you all, and no feeling of mine ought to stand in the way of your future prosperity."

"But this seems like charity," remarked Madge. "If Mr. Stanhope really had done any wrong, and wished to make restitution, he ought to have left word to that effect."

"So I think," said her father.

"And she wants us to accept part of her fortune?" Philip asked.

"Yes."

"As a gift from her?"

"A kind of peace-offering, or from pity because we have prospered so poorly."

"Father, I do not know just how you feel about it, but I can almost guess, and shall say my say first, being the only son at home. I *do* believe Mr. Stanhope wronged you. When his wife died, she left the sum of five thousand dollars in trust for her daughter. That was just eight years before the failure. He mentioned this sum, to be sure, but the creditors had no right to touch it. He had very little in his hands at that time, while you had considerable. But since then, we have all labored faithfully to keep poverty from our door, while Mr. Stanhope and his daughter have lived in elegance and luxury abroad. Could her fortune have supplied them with the means, and still be so large that she does not know what to do with it?"

It was a rather mysterious case, to be sure.

"Perhaps he might have been troubled in his last moments; but if he repented he should not have been ashamed to confess his sin. It is either a wrong on his part or a charity on hers."

"Papa," said Madge, "we have had many troubles and

misfortunes, but it seems as if the worst might be past. I *may* be hard in my judgment, but I do not want to accept one penny from her. I feel like Philip — if it came to us as a just due, I should receive it thankfully, but otherwise I would rather teach school all the days of my life than rest under an obligation.”

“Eleanor,” said her father, “what do you think of the matter?”

Eleanor flushed warmly.

“I am not so ashamed of poverty,” she replied, in a clear, proud voice, “that I would willingly accept such a favor. It would be only a partial restitution, after all — the money without any cause or explanation.”

“Did you promise anything, papa?” asked Jessie.

“No. Indeed, she wished me to consult some of you, though she was very urgent that it should be accepted in the end.”

“It is such an odd, quixotic idea; and I do not like it, altogether.”

“She gave me a week in which to consider the matter.”

“Then we shall have plenty of time to resolve,” said Madge, with a half smile.

“What is she like?” was Jessie’s next question. “Did you ever meet her, mamma?”

“I used to see her occasionally, though Clement was better acquainted with her than any of the rest.”

“Mr. Stanhope never appeared particularly fond of her,” said Mr. Ashburton, “but I think she must have been devoted to him.”

It was a subject which occupied them all the evening, both in thought and word. After Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton had retired, the younger ones still kept engrossed. Various motives swayed them, it is true, and perhaps they all fought harder against the proposal because it was something of a secret temptation. They could see what a comfort even ten thousand dollars would be to them just now.

"Yet we have to come back to the old idea," said Philip. "Mr. Stanhope is the only one who knows whether he wronged father or not. I must confess that I incline to the belief that he did; but if he never admitted this, the money is simply a gift from Miss Stanhope, and we are not poor enough to take that."

"No," they all answered, with quivering breath. For to Madge it seemed to come too late. A year or two ago it might have given her happiness; now it would be mere physical comfort; and indolence or cessation from work was what she felt she could hardly endure, until after she had fought her way out to peace.

Eleanor shrank from it as a snare. This time her eyes should not be blinded nor her judgment warped by the glitter of gold. No word of hers should sway the others against their will, or humble her father into any concession.

To Philip it was a matter of pride. They had gone through the worst of their misfortunes, he fully believed, and he would not accept this aid from a stranger unless it could be made to appear that it was their right.

Before the week ended they received a note from Miss Stanhope asking them to appoint an interview whenever it would be most convenient to see them all together. This could only be in the evening.

She came in a carriage, and unattended. The Ashburtons had discussed the subject until they were all of one mind, and perhaps, in their desire to be perfectly just, their judgment leaned towards severity rather than mercy.

Mrs. Ashburton met the young girl, who faltered a little on the threshold, and held out her hand in token of amity. But they could never guess the pang that went to the heart of this stranger as she gave a quick glance at the unsympathetic faces.

She took the proffered seat, and threw aside her heavy veil. Young and lovely, with no trace of care — nothing

but refinement, cultivation, and ease. She might have "lain in the roses and lilies of life," for any mark her anguish had left upon her.

There was an awkward silence. Rose Stanhope wished that she had trusted herself, first of all, to Mrs. Ashburton's motherly kindness.

"When I called before, I left a proposal with you, Mr. Ashburton," she began, slowly. "I wished you to consider it with your family —" and the soft voice came to an embarrassed pause.

"I shall depute my son Philip to answer for me. He represents the opinion of all, I believe."

She turned with a quick, deprecating glance, while Philip Ashburton responded with a bow.

"We have discussed it with all necessary deliberation and patience," he answered in a rather hesitating tone; not because he wavered in his decision, but talking among themselves was quite different from talking with her.

"I hope you have — that you do agree with me," she responded in tremulous earnestness.

"Miss Stanhope," — and Philip's tone fell to its softest key, — "your generous offer surprised us greatly. I think you have hardly given the matter due consideration."

"Yes, I have," she interrupted. "It is no sudden whim, but rather a settled purpose."

"With us the question resolves itself into two points: it is either a gift or a fancied restitution. We are not sufficiently needy to be willing to accept such a costly gift from a stranger. The story of our poverty and misfortune may have awakened your romantic interest; but if it is charity merely, there are hundreds of others more necessitated. We have youth, health, and employment, and pardon me if I add — too much true pride to become the pensioners of any person."

"It is not that;" and she gave an appealing glance around.

"It can only be a point of duty if it was left in your charge as some sacred behest."

She flushed deeply, and began to remove her glove with nervous fingers.

"Papa spoke of you all in his last days. If he had known that he was so near to death, I think he would have left some charges. But it was quite sudden at the last."

They all felt that the subject was a very delicate one. Only Philip's straightforward honesty could have carried him through.

"If there had been any mistake," — he shrank from using a harsher word, — "he was the one to make reparation."

She caught at the word eagerly. "Mistake," she said, the scarlet deepening in her face. "In the hurry of settling the business something might have been overlooked —"

"Nothing *was* overlooked. Mr. Weir proved very trusty, and I went through with the accounts myself. The debts were all paid, which was a source of great thankfulness to us. The record of both men stands fair to the world. Even if it had not, I do not see that your private fortune should have been thrown into the general fund."

"But it took all that — that Mr. Ashburton had ;" and she raised her face to the sightless eyes.

"That is no reason why we should call upon you to make our losses good."

"No, you do not. It is my wish."

"Because it is *that* simply, and no expressed desire of your father's, we must hesitate."

"But you will consent at length?" she said, imploringly. "I am only one, with so much more than I need —"

"Miss Stanhope, I do not wish to pain you, but I utter

the sentiment of our whole family when I say that we cannot accept this gift from you, since it does not belong to us by right. For the kindly disposition, you have our warmest thanks."

"But you don't know;" in a voice of strong emotion, as if some past recollection rent her soul. "It is so much! It will lie useless upon my hands."

"It need not do that, surely, in this world of want and suffering."

She clasped her slender fingers hard, as if in pain. Somehow she had fancied that she could confess her dim suspicion without any injury to the dead — that they would understand it in a spirit of tender sympathy, and help lift the burden that lay so heavy on her young shoulders. But their strict sense of justice made them cold and cruel, it seemed to her. Could she accuse her father of wrong, when he had never hinted at the fact? True, she had guessed at the secret of an accusing conscience; but would not they deem it most unfilial haste if she were so ready to proclaim painful suspicions? O, what could she do to make them look upon this matter in the light that appeared so clear to her — to let the dead rest in his grave without blame or censure, and assist her in repairing the wrong by receiving back what rightfully belonged to them?

Perhaps they had believed it from the first. She knew so little about the business then. She was glad, with a kind of innocent, girlish pride, to have her fortune saved from the wreck, and be able to share it with her father. She had not dreamed of any splendor or luxury abroad, but a kind of quiet life, where, away from all excitements, they might learn to know and love each other.

Instead, she had held court like a little queen. No want, no lack of anything that might conduce to enjoyment. So she had summered in the gay, glad, girlish existence, fairly revelling in the beauty that met her senses on every side.

From this she had been awakened, rudely, and yet not with rude hands. From Mrs. Westlake she had heard the story of the Ashburtons' misfortunes told in a hard, un pitying way. She had gone to her father for explanations, and found him strangely stern and reserved.

"Ashburton was a fool," he said — "no kind of a business man, or he would have looked out better for himself."

"But if there was just enough to pay the debts, what else could he do?" she had asked, simply.

"What can girls understand of such business matters?" was his sharp response. "We have nothing to do with them. It was Ashburton's look out if he chose to beggar his children."

And then Rose Stanhope began to think. Hitherto her days had been like the flight of a bird over sunny meadows. When the strange and horrible suspicion first came to her, she tried to banish it as the basest ingratitude. But now and then some sentence of her father's seemed to stamp it with a sense of shameful truth. As if he was afraid she might suspect, he took every opportunity to justify his course.

There was nearly a year of failing health, when she vexed him sorely by relinquishing her gayeties and devoting her time to him. He wanted to see her the wife of a count or a duke, and reigning in titled splendor. It might have been compassed but for her good sense and determination. She would not give her hand without her heart, and each day the consciousness grew upon her that she was enjoying that which by right belonged to others.

Perhaps he felt it too. Growing more and more into the ways of a querulous invalid, now and then his conscience smote him sharply. She longed to ask him for the truth, but the courage never came until it was too late.

The still lips in the coffin must hold their secret forever.

Like a flash all this passed over Rose Stanhope as she sat there with those clear eyes upon her. They could glory in a proud consciousness of right, while she was haunted with a horrible certainty of wrong.

"O, Mrs. Ashburton!" she exclaimed, in accents of pain, "will you not plead for me? I have no loving kin to share my wealth, and it is quite beyond my needs. If you or yours would but accept a part —"

"Philip is right," said Mr. Ashburton, roused by a remembrance of Mr. Stanhope's neglect through his long illness. "We can receive nothing from a latent sense of pity. If your father felt that there had been any undue advantage taken, I think he would have desired to make amends. Let the matter rest where it is. We shall always be obliged for the kindly thought prompting you, but since God has kept us from want in the past, we can trust him for the future."

He could not have uttered this if he had seen the imploring face. Jessie's tender heart was strangely moved.

Rose Stanhope could not trust her voice to argue further. She had hardly dreamed of being so coldly and positively repulsed. The scheme was a wild one, she admitted to herself, and perhaps they were right. Who would be willing to receive munificence from a stranger? How foolish she had been to fancy they would be ready to invite her into their household as a friend!

She rose in awkward bewilderment. "There is nothing I can do?" she said, slowly.

"Nothing," in Philip's deep, manly tone. "Since God prospers me, it is my duty and pleasure to care for the rest."

Miss Stanhope moved towards the door.

"I must bid you good night then," she said, in a low, restrained manner.

No friendly hand clasped hers; yet they did not stand aloof from any ill will. It was more the strangeness

and confusion of the moment, and the opportunity that might have united them in tender bonds passed unimproved; but their adieus were breathed in a subdued tone.

Philip handed her into the carriage. When she stumbled a little, he did not think it was because her eyes were blinded by tears.

CHAPTER XIX.

TOUCHING THE GOLDEN SHOE.

"WHAT a strange occurrence!" exclaimed Philip, returning to the parlor where the rest sat in surprised silence.

"It is not every day that one has a fortune, or part of a fortune offered, for his or her acceptance. Were we wise to refuse?"

"Philip!"

"Father, for myself I could not have touched a dollar of it. There is nothing to regret in the decision. But it seems to me now that part of our misfortune was Mr. Stanhope's fault."

"I do not wish to judge or condemn unfairly," returned Mr. Ashburton, "but I could not help thinking of some past events that might have aroused suspicion. Mr. Stanhope appeared to dread an interview with me after my illness, and never even took the trouble to call upon me here in the city. And then the style he has managed to maintain abroad has something rather questionable in it. He gave out at first that he had received a lucrative offer; but it seems that he did no business while absent, and he certainly would not have spent his daughter's fortune so lavishly, unless he believed that he had some right to it."

"Then you do feel assured that he wronged you! I must confess that I can hardly help believing it also."

"Yet you refused to receive back anything," said Madge, in surprise.

"My dear child, it would be impossible to tell what amount did rightfully belong to me. I would much rather suffer wrong than do wrong, and I certainly would not wish to

defraud Miss Stanhope of a penny. It is one of those peculiar affairs which never can be settled in accordance with any law, and had best remain where it is. We could not take a gift from her, neither could we accuse her dead father of dishonest dealing."

"And yet I felt sorry for her," said Jessie, slowly, "she looked so troubled and anxious."

"A trifle pale and embarrassed," responded Madge; "but there was an air of elegance and society about her that somehow hardened my heart against her. I could not help contrasting her years of ease and delight with ours of toil and perplexity."

"You must not let your hardships render you unjust and narrow," said her mother.

"No, mamma, I shall try to strive against it. But did she think a few thousand dollars would make amends for such a wrong, if there was one?"

"Nothing in her power can make amends," said Philip, decisively. "If the losses had not been quite so heavy, papa could have retrieved them by mortgaging Home Nook. I could have gone into business, and in a few years we should have been at ease again. I know that Mr. Weir thought there had been rather blind dealing somewhere. Her money cannot give us back the old happiness intact, and, as father says, we never should know just how much to take; so it was best not to accept any."

They were all satisfied, though the pale, sweet face haunted Jessie long afterwards. None of them dreamed for a moment of renewing the acquaintance. It could not be taken upon any basis of friendship; so it was really not worth cultivating.

And yet, if they, so rich in love, in tender family ties, could have understood her sorrow and desolation, and the hopes that had been so ruthlessly dashed to the ground! No kindred, as she had said, save one uncle, her father's

brother, and a cousin, his son, whom she never had admired. She had almost fancied they might receive her in their midst, and give her a sister's place.

So they took up their separate ways, all for lack of

“one unsounded word
To open up the sympathetic heart.”

For the Ashburtons had other sources of interest. Mr. Graham had petitioned for a nearer and dearer right to Jessie, who, in her first surprise, demurred a little.

“My dear Jessie,” he said, with a quaint, sweet smile, “it must be thought of some time, since I do not expect to wait forever, I must confess. And it seems to me the coming winter will bring a few changes, in any event; so we may as well prepare for them.”

She colored daintily at thus being linked with his life. Perhaps, indeed, she had thought too little of it.

“I want a right to take my share in household pleasures and cares, since they are seldom overpast to any human soul this side of heaven, and the delight of sharing your sweet duties, as they can hardly be given up as yet.”

“You are so kind!” and the quick tears sprang to Jessie's eyes.

“Some time I shall urge a more selfish claim. At present, you would hardly enjoy even the most exquisite happiness away from them; so we will take our long, bright holiday when you are to study no one's whims but mine, in some of the years to come. I have planned a little tour late in the summer, when Madge is at liberty, for I think the poor child needs rest and recreation!”

“O, how can I thank you! You are always looking for the things and the people outside. I am so glad!”

In her eager joy she bowed her fair head to the arm that encircled her, and pressed her lips to the hand.

“My little darling!” He raised her face, and as their eyes met, a great confusion overwhelmed her.

"O," she exclaimed, with sudden penitence. "Forgive me! I have been so used to thinking of them first —"

Her shame and distress were so genuine that he smiled, although he pitied her.

"My little girl, I try to make allowance," he said, with a rather amusing gravity, as a peculiar light twinkled in his eyes. "So that I am not crowded out —"

She placed both small hands in his, and turned the lovely, pleading eyes to his, lustrous as they were with the tears she resolutely crowded back. She had lived so much in the lives of others, grown so blessedly content with giving, that she hardly knew what it was to have something to keep — a joy of her very own. Her voice faltered, and quivering red and white shadowed her countenance like summer drifts blowing about the sky.

"I want you to believe that I love you; that if I had learned such a thing was not possible to the very utmost thought and feeling, I would have said so. But I have been a little wrong — keeping back part, perhaps —"

"My darling, that is enough;" and he stopped the sweet lips with kisses. "I do believe in you, and trust you, and I think, too, that I understand the peculiarities of the position. I liked you all so much at first, for the tender household affection subsisting between parents and brothers and sisters. I shall always love Madge for her warm espousal of Philip's wrongs. And at present I should be cruel to take you entirely away from them; yet I am man enough to want you to be glad to come to me."

"I am glad to come — whenever you like," she said, bravely, hiding her crimson face on his shoulder.

"We will have it quiet and home-like; no fuss, but just a sweet old-fashioned marriage, where I, Ward, take thee, Jessie. And then, for a little while, events may shape our lives and our surroundings; only, some time, it must be *my* home, and *my* wife. It is so precious to me to have the right to care for you, to make your way blossom again with roses."

She was crying softly, then, with a great joy, and some misgivings of conscience. She had not loved him with the entireness that he had a right to demand, but God would help her to do that in the future.

Mrs. Ashburton was consulted. It seemed quite impossible to her that Jessie could be made ready by the first of August.

"Indeed, mamma," responded Eleanor, "I think she might. Mr. Graham wishes it very much, and he has been by far too kind for us to disregard his desires. For years Jessie has been devoted to the family, shrinking from no task or duty. Madge and I can take her place, and will do it with the utmost pleasure. She deserves some reward."

Mrs. Ashburton gave thanks in her heart that Eleanor did see the matter in this light. She was redeeming the past nobly, drawing the household around her by a charm they had never experienced in her before. She made light of their troubles and perplexities, or attacked them with so resolute a courage that they soon vanished.

The preparations could not be very extensive. Besides the lack of time, they were still too poor to indulge in much elegance. But one day they were overwhelmed with surprise.

First came a sewing machine, and then sundry mysterious packages of dry goods.

"I cannot understand it at all," exclaimed Jessie, in extreme bewilderment. "Surely Philip has not undertaken this without a word!"

"No, it is not Philip;" and a warm glow came in Eleanor's face. "Dear Jessie, I want you to accept this from me."

"But how can you —"

"I am not imprudent or extravagant, I assure you. I still had in my possession some of aunt Waltham's diamonds — the ear-rings — which were valuable. I did mean at first to give them to you; but you can be happy

without diamonds, and the money in other things would prove so much more judicious. The brooch I sold long ago, when I was in a sore strait."

"It is too generous, Nelly;" and Jessie clasped her arms around her sister's neck. "For you have little Greta to think of—"

"Philip and Clement will assist me if my health should fail, or any misfortune overtake me. And it seems as if we needed this just now. It was not a very fortunate legacy for me, you know, in some respects at least, though it did me good service in time of trouble."

Jessie was deeply touched.

"Mr. Graham knows that we are poor," she said, softly. "And better than all, he understands how impossible it is to be grand on a little money. I never thought to feel quite so free—indeed, the idea of marrying a rich man rather troubled me at first."

"As it well might if he had nothing besides his money."

"And I cannot help wondering now how it will seem to have servants; though he said once he had resolved never to marry a woman who did not know how to order her own household. But this has been so different—"

"Still, it will not unfit you for greater things. It is fortunate that you have kept up with your music and some other branches of education."

"I don't suppose I should have," said Jessie, thoughtfully, "if it had not been for papa's blindness. And so," with her quaint, cheerful smile, "some good has been mixed with this bitter."

"Yes. For it is true that in the busy, weary life which poverty entails, one does not find a great deal of time for the finer and higher graces. Nay, do not look as if I had uttered heresy: one can find happiness in any station if one makes it, but to some natures poverty would always be a trial, even after pride was thrust aside, simply in its lack of refining elements. We had ours before the losses; so there

was little danger of becoming narrow or commonplace And I shall always honor Mr. Graham in that, when he stepped out of his sphere to marry, he chose some one who could grace his position as well as her own."

Jessie colored warmly. It was so good to have this strong and tender sister now when Madge's brightness and strength came only in fitful moods!

"Nelly is just royal," said Philip, when he heard the story. "All the fine gold in her nature is coming out. I begin to see the use of her trials; though, when she first came back to us with her baby in her arms, I could only think of her as the wreck of a splendid possibility."

"Stranded on the treacherous shore, but not wrecked," said their mother, tenderly.

So the girls went to work in heartsome earnest. Jessie's attire was to be simply pretty. The marriage would be a quiet one, in church, with a brief journey to Niagara afterwards.

When Madge found that she had been included in the small party, she roused herself and made a vigorous protest.

"I will be your bridesmaid, Jessie dear, and have the new silk you covet for me, but I cannot go with you. In the first place, I should not, out of pure sisterly regard for Mr. Graham. We have all fallen so into the habit of appropriating him and you, that I know it will be a positive luxury for him to have an undisturbed right to his wife for a few weeks."

"But he wishes it," pleaded Jessie, rather startled at the defection.

"Out of the generosity of his unselfish heart; but to show him that he does not possess all the goodness in the world, I shall be equally generous, and stay at home."

It was true. Madge had struck the key-note, and Jessie felt the force of her affectionate reasoning. She could say no more.

Sooner or later they told him everything. From little

half confidences he guessed Madge's secret, and the peculiar interviews with Miss Stanhope had also been discussed. He looked at the matter in the same light they did, but it gave him an idea which he meant to put into execution ere long, as a surprise for his betrothed, and this had hastened his arrangements a little.

Jessie reported Madge's refusal; but Mr. Graham had been most unselfishly earnest.

"Send her to me," he said, laughingly. "I cannot have my authority braved in this fashion."

She came, very bright and defiant, quite prepared to do battle for her idea. Yet it was not so much this that he wished to talk about. He listened to her straightforward reasoning, and gave his quiet smile in return, admitting that she had gained her point.

She was a little ashamed of her vehemence, and said, in a low, earnest tone, —

"Do not imagine that I did not appreciate the great kindness. It was giving of your very best."

"Will you take something from me in its stead, as if I were a brother? I sometimes feel as if you had not cordially forgiven that old time of pain and suffering."

"O, don't," she cried. "You shame me. I was angry and unreasonable. I am not sweet and meek by nature, as Jessie is. But I do understand how little any of you were at fault. And *you* have been generous indeed."

"Will you give me something in return?"

"What can I have that is of value to you?" she asked wonderingly.

"Your confidence, my dear child."

"You have all that is worth the taking. I never could be the heroine of a sensational romance. I dislike mysteries and morbidness."

Her tone was light, yet her lips unconsciously compressed themselves at the ending of her sentence.

"No," he replied, in a tone of quiet assurance. "There

is something that you keep back, even from God, who is so ready to listen, to comfort."

She turned deadly pale for a moment, then raised her head in its lofty, wounded pride.

"No one can help —"

"You are wrong, I think. While I despise the weakness of a man or a woman who continually thrusts the cross upon others which was given to them to bear, I do feel that there is aid promised. Are we all to stand apart, and reach and grope in secret, never clasping hands outwardly? Are we to hunger and thirst with the wells of living water at hand, and the bread which came down from heaven?"

"You don't know."

"I do know that a brave soul never shows a gaping wound. A high, heroic woman could no more gossip of her keenest griefs than she could count over her lover's kisses to her friends. Both would be alike sacred. But are you not shutting out God? Are you not standing in your own strength, saying that must be sufficient? And right beside you is the tenderness, the other long-suffering, the voice which entreats, 'Come unto me, ye weary.' In the pure and patient over-living of a great sorrow, our souls are restored by His love. From the darkness and chaos, the hopeless confusion of our own seeking, His finger points out the way of peace."

"If I could believe!" was the outburst of vehement emotion. "But you can never understand! It was the hope of my life. It helped me to bear losses, and privations, and distasteful things, to be glad and happy in the darkest times. And now it all seems such a dreary waste. To think of living years and years —"

The voice broke there with its pathetic strain, and Madge covered her face with her hands. She had resolutely shut out the others; they were growing happier, and why should she burden them with her grief?"

"My dear girl, is not the mistake just here? The far-off years will take care of themselves. You are trying to bear *all* just now. I have remarked, sometimes, that when God takes away a great hope or a great delight, it is to fit us for the event to come afterwards. All we have to do is to learn the present lesson. He shapes the rest, adapting His love to our weakness, coming down to our lowly condition. Shall we refuse the comforts He places in our way?"

"You think I have?" she said, in a low tone.

"I feel afraid that you intend to. You are strong, Madge, and you could stand by yourself; but that is not well for any human creature. The extreme of self-reliance begets coldness and hardness, though it is often so gradual that one hardly realizes the danger. So I want you to still share our love and sympathy, to make it a part of your life. Is there not some grace in taking as well as in giving?"

She had said to herself that no one had anything to give her in this life. Was she quite right? *Was* one love all? Perhaps her intense passion and grief were rendering her unconsciously selfish, not in refusing to give or to do for others, but in accepting for herself.

"You are most kind and thoughtful," she made answer, putting out her hand with her face still averted.

"I want you to take a brother's love from me, to feel that any plan of mine is made with the highest regard and sympathy. Open your soul and let in a little gladness, remembering that, —

‘Through passionate duty love flames higher,
As grass grows taller around a stone.’

"I will try," she said, softly. "But I am afraid sometimes that we take too much of what should be yours."

"Your family relations are so delightful to me! It is because I have found a home in the highest sense of the word that I am suspicious of the first break. You can hardly tell what such an example is worth to the world."

"But our world is so very small!"

"It has been a light set on a hill to me, and you know not what it may prove to others."

Mrs. Ashburton approved of Madge's decision. Mr. Graham comforted Jessie by the promise of some later pleasure shared together. They were very busy planning and working, though now and then they gave a thought to the future without Jessie. How much they would miss her!

Then an unexpected summons came for her. Another soul longed to sun itself, briefly, in the abundant tenderness.

This was through their old friend, Hetty Bright. Rachel Dormer had gone on failing gradually, and now lay at the point of death. She desired most of all that Jessie should come and spend a week with her, if God so willed that she should linger thus long.

"You might go for a day or two," said Eleanor, "but a week — and just now! It is out of the question."

"She was very feeble the last time I saw her. Mamma —"

Jessie raised her eyes entreatingly for some help in her decision.

"I think you ought to go, and yet every day seems precious."

"We might wait a little longer. There has been no day appointed," said Jessie, with a delicate flush.

"Jessie, you almost provoke me sometimes. Like Madge, I shall begin to espouse Mr. Graham's cause as that of a rather ill-used person."

But to Eleanor's astonishment, Mr. Graham consented for the whole week. She did not hear the tremulous little pathos in Jessie's voice with which she had uttered, "It will be so much to *her*, and we shall have all our long lives afterwards."

He could not have refused her such a request. So one afternoon he took her and Eleanor up to Riverside, and

Jessie was left with her friend. Every day they heard from her, and Mr. Graham made several pilgrimages. The week lengthened itself into ten days, and when they met for the funeral a fortnight had elapsed. Mrs. Ashburton and Eleanor went up, and in spite of Miss Hetty's remonstrances, brought Jessie, who was looking rather worn, home with them.

"But I shall always be glad that I went," Jessie said, as she lay on the sofa that evening, for once resigning herself to all manner of tender petting. "She was so thankful to have me, and there were many comforting hours that I shall never forget. It was, indeed, the death of a saint. Mr. Graham liked her so much, too, and she was pleased at meeting him. O, mamma! what indescribable comfort there is in a pure, well-spent life, and the trustful belief of going home at last to rest in the strength of Him who is all love, who has a tender welcome for each of His children!"

"And now you will turn gloomy, Jessie," said Madge, half regretfully. "We were none too brilliant before."

"No, not gloomy. I think sometimes even a joy may be rendered sweeter by the sanctifying influences of sorrow. I feel more than ever the sacredness of the new life I am about to enter upon. Somehow Mrs. Rachel always had a way of smoothing the tangles out of one's path."

"Were there any in yours?" asked her mother, softly, taking the little hand.

"Not exactly;" with a faint smile. "Only sometimes I have wondered if it was quite right to go to such great happiness and ease, while you would all be left here —"

"Jessie to the farthest verge," interrupted Madge. "Little sister, there is something besides the command of bearing one another's burdens."

"I know it;" and a bright smile made the fair face radiant. "Some day I may go too far to the other side in happy selfishness."

"No, indeed," returned Philip, warmly. "It seems to me that if any one ever deserved happiness, you do, Jessie, and I am glad the best and purest of all has come to you."

Eleanor brushed away a stray tear. How different this engagement had been from hers! She had persuaded herself in those days that she was marrying as much for her family's good as her own. But would she have given up the bright prospect to share poverty and toil with them? Yet Jessie would scarcely have hesitated, had there been a plain question of duty.

Not from any lack of pure affection, either. Understanding love in its highest sense now, she felt that both Jessie and Mr. Graham had found the golden mean—a regard tempered by the grace swaying their natures so thoroughly that it would make the flame burn brighter as the years went on with their chances and changes.

"O!" Jessie said, presently, "did I mention that Miss Hetty is likely to be quite an heiress? You remember the copper speculation that she used to bewail? It seems a new company has taken it in charge, and they are paying dividends already. She told me one day, regretting that it had not happened long before, for Mrs. Rachel's sake; but *she* said so sweetly, "All the money in the world could have given me no better care than you have taken of me."

"Why, everybody seems to be coming into a fortune," said Madge, gayly.

Two or three days later they received a note from Miss Hetty, summoning Mrs. Ashburton, Jessie, and Mr. Graham on some particular business.

"What can it be?" marvelled Madge, all curiosity.

School had ended, and though she used to bustle briskly about the house, now and then, for a brief while, she soon dropped into the old languor. Every day she seemed to grow more phantom-like, though she insisted her state of indolence was chronic with school teachers.

There was no solving the puzzle until the trio returned.

Mr. Graham's face was unusually bright and full of amusement.

"O, it was some quirk of Miss Hetty's," declared Madge. "Actually you are all smiling over it."

"What will you give for the news?" asked Mr. Graham. "Half of my fortune."

"It is not to be compared with Jessie's."

"I suppose not," coloring warmly.

"You would hardly suspect Jessie of being an heiress, I fancy; but it is even so."

"How mysterious you are! Mamma, what is it?"

Mr. Graham laughed, gayly.

"'A true fact,' as we used to say when we were little," began Jessie. "I have had a legacy left to me."

"Silver spoons or bed-quilts?"

"It is Mrs. Dormer's share of the copper mine," explained Mrs. Ashburton.

"O, you said it had improved in value, Jessie!"

Madge was all eager excitement.

"It seems they were offered twelve thousand apiece for their shares, some three months ago," said Mr. Graham.

"Probably they are worth nearer fifteen."

"O Jessie, Jessie!"

Madge cried and laughed in a breath.

Mr. Graham staid to supper, and they had a really delightful time over Jessie's fortune. It was too good to be true, they all thought.

"I shall make some inquiries to-morrow," said Mr. Graham. "But the matter that concerns me most is whether Jessie will not feel tempted to set up for an independent woman!"

Jessie looked very meek and sweet, and not much like rebelling at any decree. But, O, the depth of gladness in her heart!

Mr. Graham teased her a little when they were alone, but a sudden gravity overspread her countenance.

"My little darling," he said, "did my jesting sadden you?"

"O, it was not that. I have had a strange, sweet thought in my heart all the evening. While I was at Riverside, I heard that Mr. Browning's father and insane sister were both dead. It is possible that they might be induced to part with Home Nook."

"Well?" though he knew what brought the radiance to the soft eyes.

"If this fortune could help to buy it back!"

"I will endeavor to learn the particulars of the case," he returned, gravely.

She studied his face for several moments.

"You would not object?" she questioned, timidly.

"Object! when the fortune is yours, too? My little girl, you hardly understand me yet, if you think that. One of my happiest dreams has been to give you everything out of my abundance, to make your shady life blossom as in the happy days of which I sometimes hear you talk. You see I never expected to marry an heiress."

Jessie smiled tenderly. He would never censure any use she might make of the legacy.

Eleanor and Madge still sat in solemn consultation over the matter when she ran up stairs. The tired look had vanished from her sweet face.

"Is it really true?" asked Madge. "Will not some one contest the will, or the copper mine fail again? And who would think of Mrs. Dormer leaving a fortune to any one?"

"I shall always be so thankful that I went! The will was made nearly three months before, and with the full consent of Miss Hetty. If I had refused, it would have appeared most ungrateful."

"Your sins will always be on the duty side," said Madge, laughingly.

"Jessie has learned the hardest and grandest definition of true charity," responded Eleanor — "'seeketh not her

own.' My darling, we can never tell you how much we rejoice in your good fortune."

And then she recurred to her past, aunt Waltham professing so much love for her, and yet ready to bargain her off at the first convenient opportunity. How she would have sneered had any one predicted so brilliant a future for Jessie! Yet one of the "old women" she always ridiculed had been nobly generous to Jessie, and even in her poverty she had attracted a prince among men. No, aunt Waltham's creed and philosophy never could attain to any such heights. It was narrow, selfish — of the earth, earthy. Well for her that she had been saved "as by fire."

There was a household of thankful hearts that night. For, after all, poverty and care are not such unmixed blessings that one need desire their continuance. True, wealth has its evils and temptations; but is poverty exempt?

CHAPTER XX.

THROUGH PLEASANT WAYS.

JESSIE ASHBURTON offered her project for discussion the next day. If the shares she held could be sold at an advantage, and Home Nook repurchased, her wildest dream would be more than realized.

Mr. Ashburton listened in silence, too deeply touched for any word.

"Only on this condition," said Philip, — "that when Clement returns you shall be quite willing to receive back principal and interest. It must be a loan merely."

"I am not particular about conditions;" and Jessie smiled. "My greatest desire is to have our exile at an end."

They knew then how near to her heart it had been, though few words of longing had passed her lips. She had made this small abode a place of happiness, with her cheerful faith, her steady, sunny endurance; been braver than any of them knew. Ah, how Eleanor had misjudged her in the beginning!

Mr. Graham found that he could realize about fifteen thousand dollars on Jessie's stock. She was in earnest to have it sold at once. For the next week he failed to see Mr. Browning, on account of that gentleman's absence from the city.

He came in one evening graver than usual. No one appeared to remark it save Jessie, and at the first opportunity she inquired the cause.

"My little darling," he said, "you have borne so much heroically that it seems wrong to add another shadow,

when we hoped for brightness. But it is something that you will have to know ere long."

"No misfortune has befallen you?" and her heart beat with quick apprehension.

"No, and yes. It is a greater trial to me than you might imagine at first. Think of the keenest disappointment next to any pain of mine, for I fancy that I am dearer to you than houses or lands."

"O, Home Nook! — Mr. Browning does not wish to leave it," Jessie said, quickly.

"On the contrary, he is going abroad. His wife has been very much worn by the burdens of these later years. But Home Nook has been sold already."

"Sold! And he promised to give us the first opportunity of repurchasing it. O, how could he!" and her soft eyes filled with tears.

"There is some mystery about it which I do not quite understand. It is possible that he had offered it to some other person, thinking you would not be able to buy it back. He merely left this message for me; but after a perplexing search, I found him, and he was most uncommunicative. All he said might be summed up in this, that he thought he had acted for the best."

"But who bought it?"

"That was what I could not learn."

"It is some one who wishes to keep it. O, if they only knew! It is so hard to reach the summit of one's desires a moment too late! No one can ever love it as we did."

"And now, my darling, I will tell you that I sounded Mr. Browning on this matter almost a month ago. I meant that Home Nook should be your bridal gift from me. He said nothing of another purchaser then, but he seems to have purposely avoided me since. So my disappointment is exceedingly bitter, as well."

She was sobbing softly, touched and melted by his tender thought, as well as her own sorrow.

"Yes, I wanted it to be yours. Since it would be necessary for us to have a new home, under the peculiar circumstances of the coming year, I thought it might still be pleasant for you all to keep together; and as your heart was there —"

"How good you were! O, if it could have been!"

"And your sorrow is mine, though I did not dream of having my marriage shadowed in this fashion."

"It shall not be;" and she looked up bravely, the tears still shining in her eyes. "I will not forget that my first duty must always be to you."

"And your pleasure?"

"And my pleasure."

He bent over and kissed her tenderly.

There was much regret in the household, and a disposition to blame Mr. Browning for his rather unfriendly dealing. The sense of loss came home to each one keenly — the more so because they had so nearly attained their fondest desire.

"It was too good and delightful to be true," said Madge. "We must be exiles for the rest of our lives. And do you know that 'about the first of August' is nearly here?"

Jessie blushed.

"I really believe, mamma, that she doesn't care a bit about being married, and Mr. Graham as splendid as a prince royal."

But the wonder and the mystery reached a speedy solution. A few days after, while they were still in a chaos of regret, a large official-looking document came for Mr. Ashburton.

"Another fortune," laughingly declared Madge.

Mrs. Ashburton opened it, and ran her eyes over both print and writing without taking in the slightest meaning.

"Why, it is a deed," exclaimed Eleanor, — "a deed for Home Nook; a gift to papa from — Rose Stanhope."

They all glanced at each other in amazement. A deed of conveyance, sure enough; but if it had come from an enemy it could hardly have been less welcome. If possible, matters were more complicated than before.

And now there were endless discussions again. Mr. Graham's first effort was to find Miss Stanhope, but she had left the city on the very day of signing the deed. That she had gone abroad again her lawyer admitted; but he had received strict injunctions to preserve her address a secret. Mr. Browning could throw no further light upon the matter.

Miss Stanhope had, indeed, made a slight explanation to him, representing it as an actual acknowledgment due the Ashburtons. When he found that it was to come into their possession, he felt that Mr. Graham's wishes would be complied with.

"And I really could not resist her entreaty," he confessed, in apology. "She declared that it was the one great pleasure and duty of her life. Are you quite sure that you understand all her reasons?"

"Yes," replied Philip. "It is a morbid fancy that has seized her brain. If she could have seen the result!"

"What a perplexing affair!" Madge exclaimed. "If she can never be found, what are we to do?"

It was a serious question. Mr. Browning had made his arrangements to leave on the tenth of the month. Most of the furniture had been repurchased with the house, and to shut it up tenantless appeared an absolute sin.

"I wonder if we may not be carrying our pride too far," said Eleanor, thoughtfully. "I do believe Miss Stanhope is firmly convinced of some wrong, and desires to make reparation."

"But I never could have been wronged to that amount," replied Mr. Ashburton. "At the utmost limit it could not have exceeded ten or twelve thousand dollars."

"And Home Nook has cost twenty thousand."

"It was a foolish, girlish act, and I am afraid that she has impoverished herself. It leaves us under a heavy obligation to her."

"Which we cannot accept," said Madge, decisively.

It was most true. To go to Home Nook on such terms was like living under false pretences. They had no claim upon Miss Stanhope's generosity, and this was much too extravagant to be justice.

Mr. Graham's clear head solved the problem at length.

"Mr. Thurston, Miss Stanhope's lawyer, will have nothing to do with it," he said; "but this sum might be held in trust for Miss Stanhope or her heirs. That will clear our consciences."

After much discussion this was decided upon. Philip wrote to Clement at once. Mr. Graham insisted upon making up the sum for the present. Jessie was brim full of happiness again.

Then they began to look the future in the face. The incidents had come with such rapidity during the past year that before they had grown familiar with one, another claimed their attention. And this would bring about a decided change.

That they were to go back to Home Nook seemed the dearest joy of all. And yet there was a secret pang in two hearts; at least, Madge and Eleanor dreaded old associations a little, but neither would have marred Jessie's perfect content by breathing the faintest word.

For Eleanor had a remnant of her olden pride. In her girlhood days she had rather plumed herself upon her refinement and exclusiveness. Her acquaintance had been considered an honor by people in her own social standing. Now an adverse fate compelled her in some degree to be dependent upon her own exertions. In this matter she was succeeding beyond her expectations. It would be much pleasanter to keep the tender household shelter for herself and little Greta than to seek a home

among strangers ; but she knew too well the distinction the world made between the luxury of indolence and compulsory toil.

"But it is unworthy of any true woman to shrink back weakly now," she said to herself. "Since they took me in destitute and friendless, shall I not do all in my power to repay them, without thinking of the world's foolish blame or approval?"

Madge had quite another cause for dread. Not that she was hardly likely to meet the Endicotts in any other than a casual way ; but, O, there lay between such bitter pangs ! Could she glance at that bright, faithless countenance whose smiles had once been so much to her, and keep the shrinking nerves still tense and untrembling ?

Mr. Ashburton would be under the doctor's care for two months, at least. He and Mrs. Ashburton were to board at Dr. Conway's for the time. Mr. Graham proposed that Madge and Eleanor should take charge of the house, as by that means Jessie would have the more freedom.

"It seems so strange not to think of going back to school !" said Madge. "I do believe I shall feel lost without those perplexing children. I dare say I shall take Greta in hand, and make her wise beyond her years."

Eleanor smiled.

They went up to Home Nook one afternoon, Philip and Mr. Graham accompanying them. If it had changed, it was only to grow more beautiful. The evergreens made miniature forests, the old honeysuckles were thickets of foliage, and the shrubbery had hardly been altered. Beds of flowers in their late summer bloom, shady walks, clustering vines, haunts endeared to them by a thousand fond recollections. Could it be possible that they were to return ?

There were all the old familiar nooks ; but they had been despoiled of pictures and the small, graceful articles that add a home-like charm.

Madge ran from room to room, from window to window with the gladness of a child. The years of toil and privation, and that still keener pang, were forgotten for the moment, as she realized the exquisite pleasure of home-feeling once more.

"It is a very lovely nest," said Mr. Graham. "I do not wonder at your fondness for it. But can you ever be content to call another place home?"

Jessie answered by slipping her hand within his. And yet how strange it would be to have a new interest — to go away from them all, perhaps!

Their arrangements were perfected after several days' consideration. Jessie was not to be married until the first of September. Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton were to go away at the same time, and the three others were to superintend the removal.

The wedding was a very quiet one, in church. Miss Hetty was the only invited guest on Jessie's side, and Mr. Graham had asked merely his immediate family. They all felt more grave than joyful, but there was no tender regard lacking.

Mr. Graham was the only child by an earlier marriage of his father, though he had always fraternized very cordially with the second family, a host of younger brothers and sisters. Mrs. Graham gave Jessie a warm and motherly welcome.

"I was much pleased with her," she said afterwards to a friend. "Ward has such peculiar notions about women that I should not have been astonished to see him marry the most eccentric one he could find. But his wife is a very sweet, pretty girl, and quite an heiress."

Mr. Ashburton kissed his darling fondly. Would he ever be able to see the dear face again? He was becoming strangely impatient to know his fate, although Dr. Otis had assured him that there could be scarcely a doubt

They bade Jessie farewell at the railroad depot. She

did look lovely in her soft silk — as nun-like as she desired — and all her small belongings chosen with the most exquisite taste.

Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton went at once to Dr. Conway's, who had decided to take them in for old friendship's sake. Philip came home with Madge and Eleanor, Miss Hetty accompanying them, as she had insisted upon "lending a hand."

"We may as well begin at once," declared Madge, "or we shall sit down and cry over our household ruins. If it was any one but Jessie, I should have some misgiving about her happiness."

"There's nothing like work when one is a bit down-hearted," said Miss Hetty. "And the quicker you get up to Home Nook the better. I shall not have a moment of satisfaction until you are there. It was a great comfort to my poor sister, thinking you would come back."

"Which I am glad to do for her dear sake as well as our own," returned Madge. "You would hardly believe that I had lost all hope of its ever being accomplished."

"I knew it must come to pass some way. There's never been a night but I've prayed for it; and when the good news came, poor Rachel sat and thought it over in amazement, and, finally, says she, 'I shall never want the money, Hetty, and if you're willing, I shall leave it to Miss Jessie. Maybe it will help her to buy back Home Nook.' But she never dreamed then that Miss Jessie's wedding-day was so nigh at hand."

They laid aside their festive attire and went to work at once. The woman who usually did their washing had been called in for several days, and was there to assist. By night most of the furniture and books were packed, ready for a start the next morning.

Miss Hetty kept them in good spirits by her brisk ways and homely bits of philosophy. It was well to have her there. Eleanor was not tempted to smile at her shrewd

wisdom and old-fashioned ways, for she was able now to understand the true worth of such a hearty, generous soul.

Madge shed a few tears as the familiar objects were gathered from nooks and corners. After all, they *had* been happy here. Jessie's roses were still in bloom, and there was her father's rustic chair in the grape arbor. Philip and Jessie had made it. Poor Philip! out of his trials had come joy and good fortune; out of Jessie's patient work and waiting, happiness. But what was the lesson for her? Life was never without its duties, of course, but what special grace was to be evolved from her trial? Would it be easier to bear in the old home?

She seldom looked it in the face. It seemed braver to her to thrust it out of sight. A little girlish shame at having been so easily won, and a woman's sensitive pride at being as easily forgotten. But to her it had been more than a childish regard.

By noon the little cottage was dismantled, and shortly after they were on their way to Riverside.

"But it doesn't seem quite right to have so few of us," said Madge. "Who would fancy we should miss quiet Jessie so much?"

And crossing the threshold of dear old Home Nook once more as possessors indeed, they remembered the sad procession of more than five years ago. With what varied feelings they had walked down the shaded avenue that spring morning! Was their exile really at an end?

One of Mrs. Browning's servants had remained in charge — a quiet, tidy woman, who soon rendered herself useful to the new comers. Baby Margaret was full of childish prattle and wonderment, running from window to window, in the vain hope of seeing grandpa.

It took them some time to settle matters to their liking. The carpets and furniture were pretty well worn; indeed, many things needed replacing.

"If we could just bundle these old articles out and have

new ones," said Philip. "Everything ought to be bright and fresh."

"But we cannot. We are still poor, and must make the best of our poverty," replied Eleanor.

"It would be so delightful — for Jessie's sake," said Madge, with a sigh. "But Mr. Graham is noble enough to understand it; so there is no use of being ashamed. We will do our very best."

Miss Hetty came over the next day, and Madge recounted the perplexities.

"Let us take a fair and square look," said the little woman, in her brisk, energetic fashion; and they started through the house.

"If this carpet was ripped apart and turned round — there, you see how bright it would be in the middle! And why don't you turn this great parlor into a general sitting-room? You'll like it as well again; and then no one will expect the shine of new satin and velvet. The furniture might be oiled and rubbed, and the dust beaten out of the covers. And when the pretty articles from the other house come to be unpacked, why, you will hardly know the place!"

When they started, Madge found that matters settled themselves, with a little overlooking. They turned, and altered, and freshened up, taking heart with each article, that seemed to slip into the position best suited for it.

"Jessie must have the two spare rooms," said Eleanor. "We shall hardly need them for guests."

"And we will take our old ones back again. I am glad mine opens into yours, Nelly, for now I shall be alone."

Philip came home every evening, and commented on what they had done through the day. Miss Hetty ran over to see them frequently.

Tidings came from their parents, and from Jessie, who was well and happy.

The news was not long in being circulated about Riverside. Mrs. Dormer's will had soon become public property, then Jessie's marriage surprised everybody, and now the return completed the astonishment. Bygone friends dropped in — some from curiosity, perhaps, but many with words of sincerest welcome.

It was stormy on Sunday, and Greta not being very well, neither of the girls went out. But Philip brought a report at noon.

"You notice the changes most of all in church," he said. "Yet Mr. Kenneth's place seems to be well supplied, and there is no lack among the audience. But, O, the strange faces! I can hardly imagine myself at Riverside."

"But you are not sorry?" Madge asked, just under her breath.

"Sorry! What put such an idea into your head, little sister? I enjoyed it all so much, kneeling in the old place, and remembering our childish wishes and vague aspirations, until I could not help thinking of Jacob at Bethel. If we ever made any vows, how scrupulously they ought to be fulfilled! for God has brought us back in safety."

Mr. Maurice, the clergyman, called the ensuing week, and they found him a Christian gentleman. He had met Jessie at Miss Hetty's, and heard part of their story; so he hardly appeared like a stranger.

When they came to regular living, Madge was installed as housekeeper, as Eleanor's duties called her away three or four days in the week. But they could hardly consider themselves really settled until they had all the household back again.

It was a month before Jessie returned, taking them quite by surprise one evening. How pretty she had grown, and how happy she looked! It seemed as if Mr. Graham's smile was less grave, and the tender inflections of his voice touched Madge with a peculiar nearness to tears.

"O," exclaimed Jessie, "how lovely it all is! It gives one such a sense of home to walk up the avenue under the familiar trees, and have the doors open to you vistas of remembered pleasure! You and Nelly have made a bower of this library."

"It was Nelly's taste —"

"And Madge's labor," said Eleanor.

Madge had worked indeed. The two large bronze lawn vases had been brought in, still rich with summer bloom and beauty, and stood at either side of the large bay-window, the English and German ivy trailing overhead in its shadowy greenness. Some rustic baskets, filled with mosses and clusters of scarlet berries amid the ferns, depended here and there. A little fire was burning in the grate, lending a ruddy glow, and through all there was a sense of warmth and home-tenderness, the sweet and fragrant scents of woody growths, a quiver of leaves and depths of cool greenery, as if the recess opened into the hush of a forest at summer noon.

Jessie could scarcely bear to leave it, but Madge had a hospitable desire to display the rest of the house.

"We thought, Nelly and I, that you might like the rooms on this side, and we have kept ours as they were. Here is the dear old sitting-room. O, Jessie, you remember *that* night, the last dear time we were all so happy together! Somehow I had not the heart to put it in order. For we shall never be quite the same again, and Nelly fancied that you might like it for some purpose. For, after all, the whole house is yours."

"I do not look at it in that light. I believe Mrs. Rachel meant that I should do all the good and give all the pleasure that I could with her legacy. While papa and mamma live, it is to be their home, no matter what changes may come to the rest of us. I saw mamma to-day."

"And she was delighted, I know. You heard the good news?"

"That papa's operation was satisfactory, so far? Yes. O, Madge, my darling, it seems as if my life was one continual thanksgiving! I wonder how so much happiness has come to me!"

The lustrous eyes and pure, sweet face were radiant with content.

"One of us ought to be happy," said Madge, gravely.

Jessie studied her sister's serious mood. Was there the shadow of some old pain making a pensive gloom in her heart?

"Are you satisfied to be here?" she asked, timidly.

"Quite. Don't think of that for a moment. Jessie, I saw them one Sunday. We came face to face, and they all recognized me politely. Since then he has been as one utterly lost to me — not that there was any hope before, you know, only it was like a seal being placed on a coffin lid. I seem to understand *how* he has changed. But let it all go."

Jessie read the underlying depth of pain that Madge had hidden. Her own life for the past month told her what her more demonstrative sister's hopes had been.

They returned to the library, where the others were waiting, Philip and Mr. Graham in the midst of an animated conversation.

"O, and one thing I came near forgetting, Jessie. Old Mrs. Deane is dead. She sent last week for some of us to come, and I, being the only available person, went. She groaned a great deal over the deceitfulness of riches, and thought Mrs. Dormer ought to have given her money to a hospital. Then she was very much afraid your husband and your fortune would be a snare to lead you astray, and supposed that papa had completely lost his faculties by this time, and was desperately lugubrious over our affairs. What a miserable, unhappy being!"

Jessie sighed softly for the poor souls that went astray and wondered if they found heaven at the last.

CHAPTER XXI.

DAYS SUNNY AND SHADY.

MADGE ASHBURTON, bright, restless, and excited, lingered by the window again, watching. The fire burned brightly, the tremulous leaves swung in the vine-covered window, shaking out a faint, summer-like perfume. Eleanor sat at the library table copying music, Greta was playing with her picture-book and talking to herself, and Jessie sewing. Madge, alone, could do nothing but watch.

A carriage turned up the drive, and she flashed through the hall, down the steps, and stood in breathless expectation, her cheeks flushed, her soft hair blown about by the wind.

Philip sprang out, then Mr. Graham, who assisted Mrs. Ashburton; and, last of all, a slender figure, stooping slightly now, but still with patriarchal grace and dignity, brightened by the flowing beard and hair of silvery tint.

"Papa!"

"Madge, darling!"

It was the voice that he knew so well, for the eyes were still bandaged.

But he paused in the hall when Philip had closed the door. Mr. Graham removed the band, and with a glad cry they were folded to his heart. To see them here again in this dear, familiar place!

"O," he said, brokenly, "how can we thank God for his mercies, which never fail!"

They led him to the room, no one making answer. Gratitude was too deep for any immediate demonstration

and the sense of relief, after the long strain on hope, and faith, and patience, naturally rendered them silent. Step by step they could remember each incident of fresh pain as it had fallen upon them ; but the joy was like a glowing sunrise, sudden and overwhelming.

There they were, and yet not quite the same household. Ward Graham in the place of Clement ; stately Eleanor, less proud and self-contained than in the days of yore ; sweet Jessie, whose face always suggested a shady lake in summer ; and Madge, changed more than the others, the indescribable something lost out of the face of the child, little Greta climbing his knee with wondering eyes, a link of the past that still appeared strange to him.

To this deep joy was shortly after added a letter from Clement, enclosing an order on a New York banker for the sum of ten thousand dollars towards the payment of Home Nook. The peculiar and unusual proposal of Miss Stanhope could not for a moment be entertained. Whatever wrong Mr. Stanhope had done them must be forgiven, although it was noble in his child to offer atonement. But since they could never tell how much was theirs by right, they would take nothing, save their very own. He quite approved of placing the purchase-money in trust for Miss Stanhope, and on his return he expected to be able to liquidate the whole debt. He congratulated Jessie on her good fortune and happy bridal, and hoped to join their number while the household was yet unbroken. Two years more of exile, for it had been that.

"Among our many other mercies we must place Clement's loyal and unselfish regard," said their mother. "All sons might not have proved so faithful through long absence."

Philip had been advanced to a higher position, with a corresponding increase of salary. He had given excellent satisfaction, and entirely regained the elder Mr. Graham's regard.

And now they settled themselves into a regular routine once more. Mrs. Ashburton, being relieved from the care and the nursing of the last few years, again took charge of the household. Mr. Ashburton felt at first that he could not accept the life of indolent dependence.

But they all understood how much he had failed, not only in health, but in the readiness and strength of his faculties. The long illness had impaired memory and vigor, the weary months when he had been shut out of the busy world, and compelled to live in inner solitude of being, were not easily overcome at his time of life. It would be quite impossible to fill any of the higher positions, and those to which much manual labor was attached were still beyond his strength.

"So you must be content," said Philip, in his hearty, generous voice. "I know that of old our brightest dreams used to cluster around the time when you should retire from business, and spend the days in calm content, happy to enjoy and study nature, with no perplexing cares to intervene."

"But it was under different circumstances," he made answer, with a faint smile. "It is the parents who are commanded to lay up for the children."

"God has seen fit to order it otherwise in this case. Dear father, can you not depend upon your children's tender love and devotion?"

Mr. Ashburton was moved to tears.

"You have been most noble and unselfish, but I feel as if your young life and that of Clement should not be too heavily burdened."

"We have youth, and health, and many years before us, in all probability."

Ward Graham cast his influence on Philip's side. After all, when it came to the point, some one was needed to supervise a place like this. Mr. Graham had sent up his horses, and would be domesticated with them until Clem

ent's return, as he proposed to fill a son's place, not only in bond, but in reality.

For between him and the family there had grown a near and tender sympathy. In his father's house there was nothing cold or positively ungracious; but with a gay, worldly woman, like his step-mother, and a family of bright, showy girls, educated to think a brilliant marriage the greatest good, there had been but little of the fine interchange of feeling and affection characterizing the Ashburtons. With them poverty had never degenerated into coarseness, trials had not rendered them cold or selfishly indifferent towards one another. Not but that there had been mistakes, — few human lives are perfect, young lives least of all, — but they had learned some of the nobler uses of adversity.

Eleanor's path had been fraught with the most pain and deepest repentance. Pride was a battle-ground that had to be contested inch by inch, — to-day a little gained, to-morrow lost. It was harder to climb from one degree of grace to another than to float on the dead level of mere outward acquiescence. But her child had won her to the strongest effort that a woman can make, and while she had health and talent, she could not be dependent upon those who had borne so much of the heat and burden.

She found, too, a very pleasant position at Riverside. Mr. and Mrs. Maurice proved most cordial friends, and Eleanor's beautiful voice was deemed a great acquisition to the church services.

Another family had interested them all very much — a Mr. Wyverne, the organist, and his sister, who resided in a quaint little cottage not far from the parsonage. Miss Wyverne was thirty-six, perhaps, and her brother a year or two younger. To look in her sweet, noble face, one read that she had reached a calm haven through tempestuous seas; that, with her strength and vigor, the battle had not been an easy one, but that a higher than human grace

had helped her to conquer at last. From their first introduction she had been strongly drawn to Eleanor of all the Ashburton household, and little Greta became a great favorite with both brother and sister.

Perhaps they all had their duties and spheres mapped out more clearly than Madge. To her, after the excitement had in some degree subsided, and the management of the household had been taken into other hands, there came a great dearth, a void, a craving for something that she could not find in her simple daily duties. For months she had been battling against weariness and lassitude, overstrained nerves, and the shrinking of a sore and pained soul.

In the hurrying rush of events, she had managed to forget herself, and have others forget the cruel wound that had been given to faith and hope. But now she glanced at the far future in dismay—a long, dreary, purposeless woman's life, without any aims or ambitions. A spark of genius might have aroused her, but that she fancied she did not possess. Any urgent duty would have excited her to action, but her mother and Philip insisted that her season of rest had come. The heavy eyes and pale cheeks needed something besides labor to restore roses and brightness.

The vague rest had in it a deeper unrest. Perhaps it is life's dreariest pain to come to a time when circumstances invest us again with a halo that rendered us fair in the eyes of the world, and yet to feel keenly what the few years of exile have taken from us never to be replaced. And to young souls, whose vision is still narrow, there will come moments when some touch of the cold fingers of sorrow strikes upon life's harp and produces discord, when no fine sympathy can attune what might have been and is not.

Not that Madge was a love-lorn girl, still brooding over her disappointment. She had thrust it out of sight at the

beginning, and bowed to the inevitable. But in the mental vacuity that fell upon her now, all things lost their vital charm. She was exact in her religious duties, but the fervor that had once made them so comforting seemed no more. She accompanied Jessie on her visits of kindness and charity, but the too often tiresome stories from vapid and narrow souls wearied her exceedingly.

"I don't see how you can endure it," she said to Jessie. "I rather like Bessie Deane, and Hetty Bright has a crispness of her own that is quite refreshing. But these old women who take your gifts and grumble at you, who think their pains and aches so much more severe than those of the rest of the world, are an intolerable nuisance. How can you listen so patiently?"

"Their sorrows and petty trials are very real to them. And it is their misfortune that their sphere is so narrow."

"But they look continually at the four bare walls, instead of out of the window, where they might catch a glimpse of the blue sky."

"Do we never commit the same fault ourselves? Do we never forget that heaven is the bit of blue sky, when we refuse to lift our eyes?"

Madge colored. Had she been looking steadily at the four walls, dark and narrow, with no ray of sympathetic love?

"Jessie," after a long pause, "how can you always keep so calm and tranquil?"

"Do I?" with a soft little smile.

"It seems so to me — as if nothing ever troubled you."

"And yet a great many things have troubled and pained me. Only since God has asked us to cast our burdens upon Him —"

"I am afraid that is what I don't understand," Madge answered, thoughtfully. "For when we look about and see the many trials that are brought upon us by the selfishness of others, we sometimes question whether God has anything to do with it."

"O Madge! God doesn't mean that we shall question the acts of others. It is just the effect upon ourselves that concerns us. It seems to me that all this weary wondering with which we perplex ourselves is the part of the burden that He is so willing to bear."

Madge sighed.

"My darling, do you mean to go treading on thorns when there are pleasanter paths?" said the sweet, pleading voice.

"O, Jessie, there is so much, after all, that is wearisome in life! Sometimes I almost wish I was back at the old work, when I had no time for thought."

"But we cannot get away from ourselves; so we must divide the burden."

"How can one do it?"

"By taking part of some other person's."

"But it seems to me that you are all so happy now, there is nothing left for me to do. I begin to feel that a woman's sphere is essentially narrow, unless there is some special demand made upon her. And I have a horror of falling into the inanities and foolish weakness of some people."

They had been rambling slowly along through this talk. It was a mild March day, with a breath of spring in the air; and now they paused, as they saw Mr. Wyverne coming in the opposite direction, with his hands full of trailing arbutus.

"The first trophies of spring," he said, with a smile. "Come in, and share them with me."

He opened the gate as he spoke, and the two girls entered almost involuntarily.

There, in the cozy sitting-room, they found Miss Wyverne and Miss Hetty.

"We were having an old maid's gossip," explained Miss Wyverne, laughingly, "and were just thinking of starting out for Home Nook to hold another solemn conclave. So

we are most glad to welcome you. O, Robert, what a delicious armful of wild flowers! You have made a pilgrimage to the woods without me."

"I strayed into it without the slightest intention, I assure you. Go on with your talk while I make a bouquet for Mrs. Graham. I see that Miss Hetty's face is brimful of something."

The same odd little body, with her head still full of silvery curls, and a complexion as fresh as a child's. It seemed to Jessie as if she would never grow old.

"I wanted to see you, my dear," to Jessie. "I had an idea in my head, and you know that such a thing can never stay there long without causing me a deal of trouble."

"The results of your ideas are so excellent that they deserve to be brought forward as soon as possible," said Mr. Wyverne, making a mound with his flowers on the green leathern-covered library table.

"And what was this?" asked Jessie.

Miss Hetty colored a little, and for a moment seemed hardly ready with a reply.

"It is a really grand idea," declared Miss Wyverne. "A hospital for sick and disabled old ladies."

Miss Hetty laughed merrily.

"I suppose you think I shall have it all ready to go into, myself, but I mean to keep brisk for many a year yet."

"What gave you the idea, Miss Hetty?" asked Mr. Wyverne.

"Well, I've had a hospital, as you may say, nearly all my life, and I've grown rather fond of nursing. Poor dear sister used often to say, — for she was always thinking of others, — 'I wish every one who was sick could have as good care as I do.' And there's that poor Jenny Yates lying helpless in her sister's house, with a crowd of noisy children around her, and suffering everything for the want of a little quiet and care. It makes my heart ache every

time I look at her. And here I am with oceans of money that I don't know what to do with —”

Miss Hetty paused for breath, her little round face quite flushed and excited.

“What a misfortune!” said Mr. Wyverne, with a touch of quiet amusement.

“Well, there's quite a large income, beyond what I can use; and I never did approve of burying any talent that might come to me. And I've been casting about as to what I could do. You see, there's no kith or kin for me to adopt, and it seems now as if I had nothing to busy myself with. So if I take in a few of the poor and disabled —”

“A cup of cold water,” said Jessie, softly, slipping her hand within Miss Hetty's.

“But the house is such a little pigeon's nest, and it would have to be made larger. I was coming to see Miss Jessie about it.”

“O, you must let Madge plan that! She has a gift for such things.”

“The extent of my genius for drawing,” said Madge, with a laugh.

“And you really think of undertaking this?” asked Mr. Wyverne, seriously.

“I ought to improve the time I have left, remembering whose it is. And the money, you know, came so like a gift — we never expected to see a penny of it.”

Miss Hetty still held it in a peculiar awe, as if it was hardly her own.

“It will be a most noble work,” said Mr. Wyverne, “and many of our great enterprises have been started on a smaller scale. But you must be prepared for ingratitude and misrepresentation. I cannot understand why, but nearly all good objects have to make a hard fight in the beginning.”

“I am sure if I don't ask any odds of anybody there

need be little trouble. And if I offer them food, and shelter, and care — ”

“You will be making the best and highest use of your means, and God can but smile upon your undertaking.”

Jessie was delighted with the idea, and insisted that Miss Hetty should come and take tea with them, when they would discuss it more at length. Mr. Wyverne walked over also, sure of a welcome. Madge fell a little behind, and accepted him for a companion, and when Jessie saw the bright eyes and soft cheeks warm with a delicate flush, she smiled inwardly.

They found that Miss Hetty had digested her ideas more thoroughly than appeared on the surface. She was in truest earnest; and, with her usual energy, but little time was to be lost in considering the feasibility of the scheme, as it affected those at a distance. It was good, heartsome work, and she was willing to undertake it; so why should she delay?

“Only, I couldn’t take in more than two or three, as the place stands. I have a fancy that I should always like to keep Rachel’s room as it is, to be a kind of sanctuary to me when I am a little tired or discouraged, if such a thing ever happens to me. But right at the side we might build an addition, and I could have the flower-garden left as it is.”

“The plan is very sensible,” said Mr. Graham. “You will feel more comfortable to have part of your house reserved strictly for your own use. But you surely could not take care of many invalids.”

“I could find nurses as I wanted them. One and another poor homeless creature would be glad to come; and now, if any one will learn for me what kind of a place I could put up, say, for six or seven thousand dollars — that is as much as I should feel free to spend.”

“Miss Madge,” said Mr. Wyverne, “what was it your sister said about your gift for planning houses?”

Madge laughed a little.

"O, it was nothing. Instead of drawing landscapes and foliage, I used to fill my paper with cottages, and all manner of odd rooms, and nooks, and corners. I suppose it was because I loved this old house so well."

"Will you not show them to me?"

"They are hardly worth the going over."

"Still, I desire it."

Madge brought her portfolio, and the two sat down to a little quartet table, and began to inspect the sketches that were done with the neatness and fidelity of a steel engraving.

"So you think you have no genius," he said, laughingly.

"Not enough for my ambition. I could never paint a picture; and these are nearly all hints and suggestions from things I have seen."

"What is this?"

Madge colored warmly.

"O, this is part of my chapel. I did not know that it was here."

"Miss Ashburton, you ought to study architecture. I wonder that this field is not entered by women."

"Because we go everywhere?" and she smiled.

"No, but because women understand so much more thoroughly the uses of a house than a man. And this is —"

"My east window. You see, I meant to be very grand. I did that not long ago."

He studied it attentively. The brilliant colors were most artistically arranged, and the design perfect.

Then they were called upon to share some discussion as to the plan under consideration, and Madge forgot about her chapel until the party broke up, when Mr. Wyverne said, —

"I wish to take this window with me—may I? It interests me very much."

Madge nodded acquiescently.

Miss Hetty begged for a little music, "for it is next to hearing it in church," said she.

Mr. Wyverne sat down to the piano, then asked Eleanor to select something.

Two verses seemed peculiarly touching to both Miss Hetty and Madge:—

"In the wilderness astray,
In the lonely waste they roam,
Hungry, fainting by the way,
Far from refuge, shelter, home.

"To the Lord their God they cry;
He inclines a gracious ear,
Sends deliverance from on high,
Rescues them from all their fear."

And if Miss Hetty could find a duty that would be both labor and love, would Madge fail if she sought earnestly? Looking down the dim future, she seemed to see a tall and slender Miss Ashburton, with some silvery threads in her bright hair, but the face subdued to the womanly sweetness of one who has found rest for her soul!

CHAPTER XXII.

WORK IN EARNEST.

MISS HETTY encountered some of the difficulties in the path the very next day. She called on Jenny Yates, who listened to her proposal with the utmost gratitude; but Mrs Brown, her sister, a loud, slatternly kind of woman, was roused to indignation.

"Do you think I'm so poor that I can't take care of her myself—and my own sister, too? If she's complained to you, she's a miserable, ungrateful hussy! I'm sure she has the best of everything, and me a slaving off my very finger ends!"

"No, I never fancied you unwilling; but for a woman with five small children and a husband, you have work enough without the care of an invalid. And Jenny is so helpless that she needs much attention, while it seems to me that a nice, quiet place would be so much more comfortable for her."

And Miss Hetty could not help glancing round the small, untidy room, where the air was close, no clean, wholesome smells of spring being admitted.

"Well, I've never found fault, though she is a sight of trouble, hardly being able to stir hand or foot. But if you folks get a little money, you come lording it over us; and we're as good flesh and blood as you are. We ain't paupers yet, I want you to know."

"O, don't, Mary, when Miss Hetty is so kind," interposed the helpless girl.

"You hold your tongue! You're so stuck up now, along o' folks comin' in to see you, that you don't think anything

is good enough. But while I have a home, no one shall say that I threw you on the town."

In vain Miss Hetty tried to explain the case; Mrs. Brown grew more unreasonable with every breath; so the former thought it wisdom to depart.

She went directly over to the Ashburtons, and detailed her unfortunate attempt.

"I am sure I have heard Mrs. Brown complain bitterly of having Jenny ill and helpless, until my heart aches for the poor child. And those unruly children are enough to set one crazy. But Jenny does not look as if she would stand it very long."

"It will be a happy release," said Mrs. Ashburton, "and I think Jennie quite prepared for the change."

"But it is a pity she cannot have a little quiet comfort until she finds it in the grave," Miss Hetty rejoined, warmly. "And maybe I have made a mistake. Perhaps people won't like the idea of charity."

"I could easily find you one inmate," announced Jessie, almost smiling over the great disappointment visible in every line of the face.

"Could you? Who? For now that I have set my heart on the idea, I cannot bear to give it up. And I know that if Rachel had been hearty and strong, there is nothing she would like half so well. God's poor children she used to call them."

"I was in to see old Mrs. Bristow last week, and she was full of sorrow. Her son's second wife has never treated her kindly, and now he drinks a great deal, and seems to have lost all tender regard for his mother. They were talking of sending her to the almshouse."

"What a shame! and such a good mother as she was to him! Why, that will be excellent, Miss Jessie — the old name comes so handy, you see;" and Miss Hetty smiled, oddly. "But I will be wiser this time. I will ask her to come and visit me, and if she likes it, she can stay."

Madge laughed at this stroke of policy.

"And if everything else fails, I can go out into the high ways and hedges and compel them to come in."

"She will hardly be able to walk that far," said Jessie, thoughtfully. "So, if you would like the carriage —"

"If you think we should not frighten Mrs. Bristow with our grand state;" and Miss Hetty shook her silvery curls with a questioning nod.

They went that very afternoon — Miss Hetty was so impatient to begin. The younger Mrs. Bristow seemed a good deal flattered by the call, and entertained her visitors with an almost fulsome civility. The poor old lady, in her soiled cap and ragged gown, was a rather pitiable object. Past seventy, and almost blind, she had come to be considered a great encumbrance.

Miss Hetty gave her invitation in the mildest manner possible, fearful of some under-current of objection.

"To be sure she'll go, and the change'll do her good," said Mrs. Bristow, eagerly. "I should think you would be lonesome in that place where your sister died, and not a livin' soul to speak to! Granny, you run up stairs and get ready right away. Here, Sarah Jane, you go and help her. She mopes about dreadfully, bein' so near blind. If I haven't had a hard row, then no woman ever had; and Tom drunk half the time!"

It was Mrs. Bristow's habit to detail her troubles to every one who came in. The children, and Tom, and Granny were her prolific subjects, and the two guests were rather glad when they were able to bring the call to an end.

After her mother-in-law had been helped into the carriage, Mrs. Bristow came with a great bundle.

"I thought I'd bring her a change of clothes," she said. "Old people are queer about such things. And now Granny, don't you go to getting homesick!"

Miss Hetty smiled again as they drove away.

"A gladder creature you never saw," she said, a few

days after, to Mrs. Ashburton. "Why, when I told her all the plan, she cried like a baby, and kissed my hand over and over again. She is so happy and thankful, that it is a real pleasure! And I guess her daughter-in-law hoped she would stay, for she sent every old rag belonging to her, and half of them are not fit to put on. But if I only had poor Jenny Yates!"

Mrs. Brown gave the hospital project a good airing.

Miss Hetty could hardly have had a better prospectus. All Riverside knew before long that Miss Hetty Bright meant to open her house to the lame, and the halt, and the blind, and sow her small fortune broadcast.

Mr. Maurice and Mr. Wyverne gave it a hearty indorsement. In the course of a month, Miss Hetty found that the highways and byways were quite ready to accept her invitation, and that the house enlargement would be needed. So they were all busy enough planning, and Madge took a warm interest in the work.

One afternoon Mr. Wyverne walked up to Home Nook with Eleanor, whom he had met on the cars. They found Madge on the lawn, entertaining baby Greta with a marvellous picture-book.

Something of the old brightness had returned. All the gay girlishness would never be there again, not even with the most perfect health; for after we have once sipped the chalice of a profound and costly experience to the very dregs, there may be summer ripeness, with a soul deeper, stronger, and richer, but hardly the abundant bloom of the earlier spring.

"Do you remember your design for a stained-glass window?" Mr. Wyverne asked presently.

"Yes. You have it, I believe."

"Would you object to part with it?"

"No;" and she glanced wonderingly at him.

"I showed it to a friend of mine, who thought it very fine."

"O!" and Madge flushed with pleasure.

"He has offered two hundred dollars for it. It is worth more, he admits, but he cannot afford to make any better proposal, and would really like to have it. It might be a good thing for you if you cared to try the work."

"Two hundred dollars! Why it is splendid; is it not, Nelly? O, Mr. Wyverne! how can I ever thank you?"

She brushed back the bright hair in her eagerness, still incredulous.

"Will you empower me, then, to conclude the bargain?"

"I shall be more than obliged to you for the trouble."

"It will be a pleasure to me"

The scarlet lip quivered a little. With a great tremble in her voice, she said, —

"Are you quite sure that it is really mine? For I cannot believe —"

"That you have blossomed into a genius? My friend thinks that you should cultivate your talent to the utmost."

Madge ran off to her mother with the joyful news. By degrees she had drifted back to the old place in that dear heart, to the tender twilight confidences that cleared up so many difficulties. She was learning that no one could spring at once to the top of the Rock that is so much higher than ourselves. In her blindness, she had missed for a while the sure steps provided by a wiser hand, and going back, sought them with careful patience. A cheerful, steady endurance first, instead of the dull resistance that she had once called resignation; and then, waiting God's appointed time, leaning on Him when the waves rose high. She began to understand the grand secret of Jessie's life.

They were all wonderfully pleased with her good fortune. Philip and Mr. Graham congratulated her.

"I believe I was meant for some kind of a business woman," she said, laughingly. "And though this may not be very profitable, it will afford me a new interest."

"Was life so devoid of it?" asked her mother, with a half sad, half sweet smile.

"O, no, mamma; don't think that. There always was a restless spirit within me, and it will take years to bring me to any kind of harmonious development. Why do you look so grave?"

"My darling, I do not want you to make a rebound to the other extreme. Home must always be a woman's most sacred sphere, and instead of making it conform to other duties, she should make other duties subservient to it, unless there is an urgent necessity for her to enter the world's arena."

"O, mamma! I do not believe there is any danger of my becoming a noisy reformer, though I do not think I have Jessie's or Nelly's special gift for the small, sweet graces of the fireside. But they may come by cultivation. You know how I once rebelled against teaching school; but I find now that, in return, it taught me some of my grandest lessons. I seem to understand Greta the better for having studied other children, and my impulses are not so impatient. And I begin to see what the apostle meant when he said, 'Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.'"

"And I pray the last may bear fruit abundantly with you, my dear child," the mother said, kissing the sweet young face.

It was a happy summer. Without demanding anything the Ashburtons had been reinstated in their old position. Their refinement and culture had in it the ring of true gold, and Riverside soon found them one of its chief attractions.

Miss Hetty's new house progressed rapidly. Madge and Jessie had planned the interior. On the ground floor there were three rooms, and above, the same number, with the addition of a bath-room. Plain, neat, and convenient, quite distinct from the other part, if one chose to shut it

off. Already Miss Hetty had three inmates, and had found it necessary to call in the services of a good strong woman. Mrs. Brown had changed her opinion somewhat, aided considerably by Mr. Maurice.

"And I do believe now that she would be willing to have me go," said poor Jenny, tremulously. "O, if I only could!"

"The poor child!" ejaculated Miss Hetty. "She shall come and have a little rest and peace. If you could only manage it, Miss Jessie!"

Jessie did "manage" it very nicely. Mrs. Brown considered it a great favor to accede, and confessed that she never had any wonderful opinion of such places, as the heads of them usually wanted a great deal of glorifying, and she nor hers ever had come to charity yet.

"But if you chose, you might do many things for Jenny, there, sending her clothes and food."

"No, indeed. If she goes, I shall wash my hands of the matter," was the tart reply. "If Miss Hetty wants her so much, let her take care of her, then."

So Jenny Yates was removed to pure air, quiet, and cleanliness. For nearly five years she had been disabled, first with inflammatory rheumatism, and then partial paralysis. Now she was quite helpless, sometimes not even having the use of her hands.

"That crowds me pretty well," said Miss Hetty, "but we shall soon be in the new part. But I am glad to take her in, for she seems to me like one of the Saviour's 'little ones.' And now, my dear, I have something else to tell you, which is very odd. Read this letter."

It was an early summer evening, and they were sitting on the wide porch at Home Nook. Miss Hetty drew the epistle from her capacious pocket, in which she managed to stow away a little of everything, and handed it to Jessie.

The writing was in a delicate, lady-like hand, and the

person told her story very simply ; a widow, past forty, with no children or near relatives, and but a small income, an incurable invalid. "I listened one day to a description of yourself and the work you were proposing to do," she wrote, "and the idea has haunted my mind until it has given me courage to speak. I am not a proper subject for a hospital, because there is no remedy for my lingering diseases — nothing but waiting God's time patiently. But my income is not large enough to board and keep a nurse, and I have often thought that if I could find some home for helpless invalids, where I could have care in common with others, I might be able to offer partial remuneration. If such an arrangement could be made that, by paying five dollars a week, I could secure a quiet home and a little religious society, I should be most grateful. In the summer, I am able to walk out short distances but in the winter I am confined to my room, much of the time to my bed. Think over my case, and if it is possible to offer me any refuge, may God kindly dispose your heart towards such a work of charity."

"She is a lady, evidently," said Jessie, "and a patient Christian woman. But where could she have heard?"

"You know I meant to take in only poor people," was Miss Hetty's rather hesitating rejoinder. "A kind of Old Ladies' Home, but for the sick as well."

"Will you allow me to express an opinion?" asked Mr. Graham, with a smile.

"O, certainly."

"Mr. Maurice, Mr. Wyverne, and I have been discussing your project with the judgment and wider experience of men. At present, it is your charity, supported by your money ; but we think you are laying the foundation of a work too noble to be allowed to perish with your life ; yet, in order to outlast you, it must have a permanent organization, and some source of income. I will tell you now that Jessie and I mean to endow one room — that is, set aside,

say three hundred dollars, to be paid every year for the care of this particular inmate. In the course of time, you may have similar donations. And if this person under consideration is every way worthy, it certainly would be a charity to receive her. Few private families are so situated that they could take proper care of an invalid for that compensation, while in a place like this it would probably pay all the cost. A few such inmates would help in the expenses, and in no wise detract from the benevolence of your idea."

Miss Hetty rubbed her eyes in a sort of dazed way, as if she had but half understood.

"My heart went out to the poor thing at once," she exclaimed, "when I read that line where she said she heard that I had lost my only relative, an invalid sister."

"If you like, Jessie and I might visit her."

"O, that would be so kind! You see, after all, I have not much head for business, except the plainest of figures. My house will cost five thousand, and the fitting up perhaps a thousand more. After that, I shall have the income of about twelve thousand dollars; so I shall have to manage economically. And you are so good to think of—"

"We want an interest in it, you see," with a grave smile. "But I believe, when you have your plans all made, that some organization will be necessary."

"You will make me out too grand, I am afraid. After all, it is just a home for a few poor, sick people who are queer, and a trouble to every one else."

"A hiding-place in the storm," said Mrs. Ashburton, softly. "Dear Miss Hetty, your noble work will shame us all."

"I am sure I could never have put my ideas in such good order but for you here at Home Nook. It seems to me, after all, that the fortune did come just in the right time. Poor cousin Bright! Maybe he knows now how good an investment he made for us;" and Miss Hetty gave a sigh to his memory.

Jessie and Mr. Graham went to call upon the new applicant, Mrs. Farrand, and were much pleased with her. They detailed at length the plan of the Home, and that it would be most simple in its operations.

"Everything I hear impresses me more favorably with it," she answered. "Let me try it for six months, at least. A woman with so large a heart as your Miss Bright could not fail to be kind to those under her care; and that is what we invalids need most of all. A friend of Mr. Maurice was explaining the plan to me, and already I have taken a great fancy to your clergyman."

So they promised to let her know the decision by the time the building was completed.

Miss Hetty received several donations towards the furnishing. Madge had gone into the project with her whole soul, and they found Miss Wyverne invaluable. By the middle of August it was ready to be put in order, and a number of ladies volunteered to assist.

There were five chambers on the second floor, counting the two in the old part. Jenny Yates and Granny Bristow shared the room where Madge had once dreamed her happy dream and slept in all the unconsciousness of girlish love and trust. She never went there without thinking of it, and the fervent gratitude of both women seemed to hallow the brief bloom. So she begged that they should not be removed.

Then there was another poor, palsied thing, deserted by friends and left to the mercy of strangers. Ah! how little is human love of the immortal, save in favorable circumstances! Does that, too, bear the bane of the first sin?

Besides these three, a younger woman, in consumption, and strong-armed Catharine Day, who could be gentle and tender in spite of the gaunt figure and hard-featured face. Miss Hetty could hardly have found a better assistant than this one who had come of her own accord, and who had been a playmate in younger days.

Mrs. Farrand was summoned presently. The second floor was devoted to the inmates, for Miss Hetty still clung to the room she and Rachel had shared so long.

They found Jessie's description of Mrs. Farrand not overdrawn. A gentle, yet high-minded Christian woman, bearing her trials with patience, and grateful as only an appreciative soul can be, with no morbid pride concerning a home that might be construed to have in it some sense of obligation.

Mr. Maurice opened the house with a simple and touching service. Quite a congregation were gathered, many of whom appreciated the good work, and wished its founder God-speed. But there were not wanting some to prejudice or utter dismal forebodings. A few did not hesitate to pronounce Miss Hetty a great fool, and predict that she would need the money herself that she was squandering so lavishly.

"It's an old maid's whim, and that's all you can say about it," declared Mrs. Brown, with a sneer. "She always was a flighty little thing, and she'll get sick enough of it. Jenny thinks it's heaven. To hear that girl talk, you'd suppose she never had had anything done for her in her life; and I a slaving for years to take care of her — the ungrateful girl!"

It was so neat and delightful, with its clean, handsomely-laid floors and simple furniture. Jessie and Madge had contributed some pictures, and Eleanor some illuminated texts, framed in different rustic styles. Nothing cold, or prim, or unlike a pleasant, cheerful home.

Miss Hetty discussed the organization with Mr. Ashburton and his son-in-law, Mr. Maurice, and Mr. Wyverne, and finally left it in their hands to be concluded. When all expenses were paid, she found that she had thirteen thousand instead of twelve, and Mr. Graham had promised to invest it in the best manner possible. Besides this, there would be an income of five hundred and sixty dollars, and probably some gifts.

“And now that we have seen Miss Hetty safely through, we may venture upon a little pleasure ourselves,” said Mr Graham. “Jessie and Madge both look as if they needed a holiday.”

Madge found all her objections overruled this time, and she really could do nothing but consent. Eleanor had her wardrobe in nicest order, Mrs. Ashburton promised to be devoted to Miss Hetty’s establishment, and Philip insisted. So one morning the trio started amid a shower of fond and cordial farewells.

Over lakes and rivers, prairies like a boundless sea, vast desert solitudes, wild, grand mountain tracts, reaches of forest where the sound of their own voices startled them. Glowing, brilliant beauty on every side, touched with fathomless mystery — for who can translate all the secrets God’s finger has written on mountain-tops, or in the cool, fragrant depths of clustering valleys? Something to stir their souls with reverent emotions, to quicken life in their pulses, and kindle worship in their hearts — to re-create, as it were.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FLOATING OUT.

MADGE returned almost as brilliant as the glow of the autumnal sun that had ripened her cheek with its mellow tint — stronger in soul and body, fuller, deeper, and richer in all the genial elements that form a true woman. The crudeness of girlhood had parted like the outside husk and disclosed the rare soul, purified by the vigils of pain, its suffering, its trials. These had lifted her out of herself. The vital pith of true earnest endeavor, had proved a strong tower in the day of weakness, when the soul, in the anguish of solitude, had prayed to have the cup pass from her lips. She had come to that better dawn when she could say, “Not my will, but thine.”

Clement was on his return, or at least had left his post, after seven years of assiduous labor. He was not a rich man, but he had realized sufficient to repurchase Home Nook and to afford him a fair start in life. He intended to take an overland trip through Europe, reaching home some time during the next summer. Now that it was past, the years seemed like a dream. God had mercifully kept them in the hollow of his hand, and although the storms had gone by, they were not overwhelmed.

A busy, delightful winter it had been at Home Nook. Eleanor had made some advancement in her profession with both profit and honor. Greta was fast outgrowing babyhood -- a rather grave little girl, still extravagantly fond of her grandfather. Shy beyond the precincts of her own family, yet Mr. Wyverne and “aunt Clara” were especial favorites with her. She sometimes spent whole

days at the cottage. Miss Wyverne had a tender little corner in her heart for all children, but this one appeared strangely near.

But she was no longer the baby of the household. Jessie's little boy had usurped that place. A large, fair, grand specimen of babyhood, after the most approved fashion — laughing and crowing if he caught sight of a smile, or heard the sound of a well-known voice.

Madge had taken Jessie's place in Miss Hetty's Home, and in some of her other good works — an active, energetic girl, the sharp corners toned to softness, the eager impatience mellowed into ripe sweetness, and occasional flashes of the old brightness cropping out.

There had been some changes in the Home already. The poor palsied creature drifted peacefully out on the wide ocean of Eternity, one night, and had her stammering tongue loosened by angels. Two others had been admitted, and all was going prosperously. A few generous, unknown gifts had been sent to Miss Hetty, who was brisk and eager, and nowise disheartened in her good work.

She found a strong ally, indeed, in Catharine Day, a faithful and efficient worker, whose nerves were steel, and whose limbs seemed to be iron. Now and then she took up Jenny Yates as if she had been a baby, and carried her to Mrs. Farrand's room, for the sake of the change. Mr. Maurice came in every week to hold a religious service, and often of an evening Mr. Wyverne would go with a few choice spirits to comfort the weary souls with grand and tender old hymns — a song in the night, indeed.

"I never thought there could be anything quite so near to heaven on earth," said Jenny Yates. "Sometimes I lie here and cry out of pure thankfulness, my heart seems to be so full. Not that I'm ungrateful to sister, who did the best she could with all her children, but more grateful to God, who put this in Miss Hetty's heart. I used to pray

daily to be taken out of the world, but now I'm quite content to wait God's time. The pain doesn't seem half so hard to bear."

Madge, looking at the wan, white face, fancied there would be another "call" before many months.

Granny Bristow was the happiest of the happy. She went groping and stumbling about, with a cheerful chirrup for every mishap, and nothing delighted her so much as to be allowed to do a little work.

Madge stood by the window of her mother's room, one afternoon, watching the two figures who came slowly up the broad walk, talking earnestly. When they reached the steps, she ran down; but on the stairs she met Master Ward, in the arms of his nurse; so she had to stop and hear him laugh.

The hall door opened, and Eleanor entered alone.

"O!" in a disappointed tone. "Why didn't Mr. Wyverne come in?"

There was another "window" under consideration, and Madge was impatient to hear ever so small a fragment of news.

Eleanor said something just under her breath. Her face was flushed and her eyes full of tears. She passed Madge swiftly and ran up stairs.

The young girl went into the library to pet her flowers a moment, picked up a pair of gloves which she had left lying upon the table, and studied the aspects of the weather in a dreamy fashion.

Ten minutes perhaps elapsed before she returned. Eleanor sat on her mother's footstool, her face half hidden on the friendly shoulder bowed for her support.

"O, Nelly," exclaimed Madge, "what has happened? Or if I interrupt —"

Eleanor stretched out her hand, and Madge drew near.

"O, Madge, my darling, if it had only been you!" she uttered, tremulously, with a sob in her voice.

"If what had been?" asked Madge, in surprise.

For a moment or two there was silence. Mrs. Ashburton looked exceedingly distressed.

"I think I can guess," began Madge, slowly. "It is about Mr. Wyverne."

Still there was no answer.

"He loves you;" with a quiver of joy in her voice.

"If it had not been!"

"Why, Nelly?" Madge knelt beside her and twined her arm around the drooping form. "He is a noble, generous, and refined gentleman, with a high, tender, and chivalrous soul. I suspected it when Jessie and I returned from the West."

"How blind I have been! But then mamma has shared the same — hope."

"That he cared for me?"

Madge's face was scarlet.

"Why not? You like and approve him."

"But — Mamma, Nelly, I think this is just right. It has given me a little secret joy all the time. Why should not Nelly be happy with a man so eminently fitted for her? Their tastes, feelings, and acquirements harmonize so perfectly! for Mr. Wyverne has none of the narrow jealousy one often finds in musical people. He is not rich, to be sure; but he is a fine musician, and is gaining fame as a composer. But we have learned that happiness does not depend upon wealth."

"He always appeared fond of you, I thought."

"Nonsense!" and Madge laughed. "He is interested in what he calls my genius; but endless discussion on stained-glass windows, and all their belongings, is not love. He likes us all, especially little Greta. O, Nelly, it is just right, unless you have some scruples about second marriages."

Eleanor's face flushed a painful crimson.

"Mamma, persuade her. Miss Wyverne loves her like a sister already. Greta could never have a tenderer father."

Eleanor rose. "It has surprised and bewildered me so much!" she said, slowly. "I had never even thought of it. I feel as if I was hardly worthy of such boundless trust, such loyal regard."

Greta ran through the hall calling "Mamma!" and Eleanor went out to meet her child, taking her off to her own room. Madge studied her mother with an amused smile, asking presently, —

"Are you disappointed because Mr. Wyverne has chosen the one who suited him best?"

"My dear, not that exactly," said her mother, in some perplexity.

Madge took the vacated seat and leaned upon her mother's knee.

"Have you any scruples as to my remaining a spinster?" she asked, almost gayly.

"Madge," in a half sad, uncertain tone, "your happiness must always be my first desire."

"Do you think me unhappy?"

There was a sweet seriousness in her voice.

"We have never spoken of this since that fatal day. Madge, you have kept your secret locked in your own soul, and one could only suspect your pangs. That they have been deep, I know; that you will forget, I trust."

"It was a very, very hard fight, mamma;" and Madge hid her face, while her voice faltered a little. "I had come to depend upon him for so much happiness and comfort! I endured my toil and privations with a proud, courageous spirit, dreaming how they would be crowned at last. I did love him. All that part of my heart seems like something laid away in the grave, sacredly, never to be disturbed."

"My darling —"

"Let me go on," pursued the soft, clear voice. "I am no weak, love-sick girl. There was a long while when it seemed to me that the glory had faded out of heaven

and earth, when I almost lost sight of God; but in his great mercy he brought me back, and showed me that 'no man liveth unto himself, and no man dieth unto himself.' I found my work again, and my worship. When I dropped all vain striving and self-delusion, all clinging to idols of men's hands, God reached out his, and drew me to the light. Since then I have been content, happy."

"And you have forgotten —"

Mrs. Ashburton raised her child's face, and studied it tenderly.

"There are some things that never can be forgotten, mamma;" with the voice still soft and clear. "But I feel now that the wrong was very deep. He sinned against me bitterly; let me go on loving and trusting when he was growing into another affection; for I will not think so meanly of him as to suppose he was won by wealth. I put him out of my life because he is no longer worthy to remain in it, and have learned to pass him by as a stranger. But you, dear, and papa must accept the offering that I shall strive to render purer and better each day. I will not say now that I never shall marry, but it will be a long while before I can dream any new dreams. So I am glad it was Nelly, and not I, whom Mr. Wyverne fancied. You will need a home-daughter in the years to come, and I shall be here to fill the place. Miss Wyverne lives a good, sweet, wholesome life, and I am sure that dear Hetty Bright is worthy to be ranked the foremost among women. So I hope I shall not be quite wasted!"

She raised her fearless eyes, shining with a few stray tears. There were strength, and tenderness, and honor, and the deeper loyalty to God, who was to be first and best in all the years to come.

Mrs. Ashburton kissed the warm, bright lips. No pale shadows lurked about the face now.

"So we shall be very happy, mamma."

Eleanor revolved her question in sore perplexity — especially as the knowledge grew upon her that her inmost heart was not wholly indifferent to the man who had thus hastily bespoken her warmest regard. The thought of a second marriage had never crossed her mind. It seemed so much more probable that she would be the stay and solace of her parents' declining years, and these words had disturbed the tranquil sources of quiet life.

But if Mr. Wyverne could not be a lover, he insisted upon a friend's place in the household. With fine tact he managed to render Eleanor at ease with him once more, and a casual observer would hardly suspect that a word had been uttered.

Yet Eleanor felt that the current was against her. Every one appeared to acknowledge his right in a tacit manner. She could hardly hope to find a person whose tastes and requirements harmonized more perfectly with hers. She had come to the deeper knowledge of her needs, her sources of strength and weakness. The one found a sure support in his clear, steady soul; the other seemed to clasp tendrils with what was most noble and manly in him. One of the blessed and satisfactory lives opened before her, whose glory would blot out that imperfect, mistaken past. But still she would wait.

So another spring began to dawn over them. Clement would be home in the summer, and in the ensuing autumn Mr. Graham purposed to set up a household altar of his own in the city, since their number had swelled from two to four, and he begged that they would all consider it a second home.

Madge was busy enough with her duties and the two babies, though Greta was oftener a companion. She managed to visit Miss Hetty nearly every day, and poor Jenny Yates used to watch with a strange longing for the light, familiar step and breezy voice, like a waft of air fresh from the upland.

Paler, thinner, a little weaker every day, a shortness of breath, a feebler clasp of the fingers, and a touch of something strangely sweet, yet awesome, in the smile, a flutter hovering in the faint, wandering tones.

Madge kept flowers in her room, and brought her many delicacies. She did not think it tiresome to listen or to talk, though the subject might be simple and the ideas vague or unformed.

"What is it?" she asked, one evening, as the wistful eyes followed her about, an unexpressed longing in their depth.

"I hate to have you go, Miss Ashburton. You never staid here all night — did you?"

"Not since — it has been altered."

"Did you before?"

"O, yes — once. I made a visit here when I was hardly grown, a year after we left Home Nook. And I slept in this room — my sister Jessie and I."

"Did you?" with a faint, pleased smile. "How lovely it must have been to come back, Miss Ashburton!"

There had been mingled pleasure and pain in the return at first, and one of the old pangs, rarely felt now, crossed Madge's heart.

"For it is so beautiful even here! No one but God could have led Miss Hetty to open her house and take in the poor and miserable. I have had such peaceful days here! Miss Ashburton — do you think — that the end may be near?"

"O, Jenny!"

"I wonder a little about it on days like this when I have no pain — especially since the spring has come in. Every night I seem a little weaker, and heaven closes around me as the twilight drops down. I've never done anything for God —"

"Except to bear this long, wearisome sickness patiently."

"I am afraid I have not always. It does not seem

much virtue to be patient in a place like this, where every one has a smile and a kind word for you. I used to give poor Mary a good deal of trouble, longing for things that I could not have. She didn't want Mr. Maurice to come, you know, and the singing and praying fretted her. Maybe it does seem foolish, when one is strong and well, and has so much work to do; but I always loved it. You'll tell her some time that I was sorry for every quick word, and for all that looked like ingratitude."

"My dear girl, yes. I am glad that you feel so tranquil."

"Why shouldn't I? God has been so good to me at the last! If Miss Hetty never did anything else, her care of me would be enough. O, Miss Ashburton, since I have enjoyed this comfort, I've thanked God daily that he has put it in the hearts of some to care for the sick and the needy. They cannot have much rest in their own forlorn homes."

"Yes, Miss Hetty's idea was worthy of her generous heart. No one could have made a wiser or better use of a fortune."

"O, Miss Ashburton, if you only wouldn't go!"

The eyes were full of pleading light.

Madge smiled. "Do you want me to stay so much?"

"I feel as if I didn't want you to go away to-night. You seem like a bit of sunshine after the day is done, you are so bright and sweet. And somehow —"

Madge glanced at the worn face. Four and twenty — only a trifle older than herself. What had her griefs, and sorrows, and wounds been, compared with these weary years? Should she grudge one night to this poor girl?

"I will stay if you desire it, Jenny."

"O, thank you! thank you!"

By and by, Catharine brought up some supper. Jenny fancied that she did not want any, but Madge fed her a little jelly. Then she went down herself and took tea with Miss Hetty.

“Catharine thinks Jenny will not last much longer.”

Madge started. Death was a vague idea to her of something that might happen days hence.

“But the poor child is ready any moment. I never saw any one so grateful, and I am so glad she was brought here. Sick people cannot have many comforts in such poor homes, even when those around them do their best; and Mrs. Brown is an untidy termagant. She was so afraid to have Jenny dependent on charity, and yet she has never sent her a sixpence worth since she has been here. Not that I care, though;” with an odd smile.

Yet for all this kindness, Mrs. Brown was continually saying ungracious things about the “old maid’s ruin,” as she termed it. “Miss Hetty looked fine, sticking herself up for a public benefactor. It was a great thing to have so much money that you didn’t know what to do with it.”

Miss Hetty did not mind that, nor sundry other unfriendly criticisms. Here were work, duty, and the reward of a good conscience. Better far than be setting up for fine ladyhood and ease, when that would be quite foreign to her nature.

Madge went up to Jenny presently. Through the soft May twilight they talked of the other country, of the love that purifies and exalts, giving courage to the trembling soul as it nears the solemn shore. Mrs. Farrand came in, and the two sang afterwards — dear old hymns that make melody at the very gate of heaven.

“I am going to sleep in the next room, Miss Ashburton,” said Catharine. “Miss Hetty says that by and by you had better come down with her.”

“When I am tired,” returned Madge.

Jenny slipped the wasted fingers within those so firm and warm. Darker grew the night for a while, and then the moon began to thread her path among the stars. There was no continuous talking now, but fragments of sentences and precious promises.

And through the pauses some old remembrances thronged to Madge's busy brain. How long ago it seemed since she was the happy girl who had slumbered here so unconsciously! What had God meant by giving her a brief taste of the cup of joy? That she should learn how many things some souls miss forever — how that, in some lives, there is no spring and no summer? Perhaps. To turn the wild, untrained blossoms into tender graces, to take away the support to which she might cling, so that, like the palm, she could grow into steady self-reliance.

Jenny dozed quietly. Madge at length leaned her head over on the pillow in a vague, dreamy mood. Once she had fancied her work almost done, and would have been content to die — now she was glad to live. The world was bright and busy again.

She started suddenly. Jenny clasped her hand tighter.

"O," she murmured, "don't leave me! I want you to go clear to heaven's gate. 'Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.'"

"It is the invitation of the King of Glory."

"Yes."

There was a little shudder, a strange clinging to the brave, steady hand. Madge bent over and pressed her lips to the forehead. After that, a kind of awesome, midnight silence.

Catharine, hearing the stir, came in presently.

"Had you not better go down to Miss Hetty?" she whispered, softly.

"No, I promised to stay. She is quiet, and has not appeared to suffer any."

"She will never suffer again."

As Madge raised her hand in surprise, the nerveless fingers slipped away. And she knew then that Jenny had passed over the river. All the sting of pain and sin had been taken out of this last moment.

"Unto God we commend her," said Catharine, gently

raising Madge. "Go down to Miss Hetty, but do not disturb any one else."

The moonlight was streaming in all the windows. How wide and lonesome the world seemed for the sake of the one soul which had gone out of it!

Miss Hetty took her in and soothed the throbbing pulses, gathering her to her fond, capacious heart. For the whole world was of kin to her now, and children would praise her who had never called her mother. Is the love of such women wasted? Is their household a failure?

They missed Jenny Yates sadly. Her exceeding patience and thankfulness had seemed to make a sunny spot in the house. Granny Bristow mourned her like a child — perhaps more deeply than her own sister.

"One gets so attached to them," said Miss Hetty, between a sob and a smile, "that one hates to let them go. But with all our efforts, we can never quite make a heaven."

If we could, we should hardly need the other country. And therefore our works and affections here must needs be imperfect.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BETWEEN TWO.

It was a lovely June morning. Madge Ashburton had brought the roses to her cheeks by her work among the flowers, though they were seldom missing now. Her father enjoyed this companionship so much—the sights and sounds, the fragrance and beauty, and the bright face of his darling! It was such a blessed thing to have the world opening before him! Now and then he would pause in some labor of love and bow his head reverently, remembering the old apostolic injunction, “In everything give thanks.”

A strange man came up the walk, looking about a little uncertainly.

“Can I see Miss Madge Ashburton?” he asked.

“I am Miss Ashburton,” was the answer.

“I was told to deliver this note into your hands.”

She pulled off her garden-glove, and took the dainty missive with its creamy envelope and antique monogram.

“Do you wish an answer?”

“No, I think not. I was just to give it to you;” and the man bowed.

“Very well.”

She watched him as he wound round in the line of the green, overhanging shrubbery.

“A stylish invitation, papa,” she said, laughingly. “We are quite grand again.”

But she ran up stairs to wash her hands and study the letters a little while. It is so pleasant to wonder a moment what the secret is that you hold in your hand!

A very brief note, with a signature that turned Madge's bright face ashen pale — "May Westlake." The words blurred together before her eyes.

"Will Madge Ashburton, who has pity upon all poor, sick, and unfortunate souls, come to one who needs her sorely, who cries unto her out of the depths of anguish?"

"MAY WESTLAKE."

For many minutes the request seemed to signify nothing to her as it floated to her brain. Was it real? Why did May Westlake, in the midst of her luxury and happiness, need *her*? She had taken the love while Madge sat in the shadow.

Then she rose and went to her mother.

"I do not seem to understand it," she said, huskily. "Why should she want me?"

Mrs. Ashburton's first feeling was deep regret that the current of her daughter's life, growing so serene, should be broken up again by any tumultuous waves. Then her natural kindliness and pity conquered.

"She does want you, it seems, and I suppose you can hardly refuse," said the mother, with a sigh.

"You think I must go then?" as if half hoping for some reprieve.

Mrs. Ashburton studied the note. The hand that penned it was tremulous with mental distress or physical weakness. Yet why should she ask this hard thing?

"O, mamma, I cannot!" and Madge buried her face on her mother's bosom. "It is too much!"

Mrs. Ashburton was in a sore strait. It was a cruel request. Yet what if it were sickness unto death?

"Tell me to stay. She has so much — all! What can she want of my peace?"

"My darling! God give you strength to decide," the mother faltered.

"Is it a duty?"

"I dare not say that it is not. If she should be ill —"

"O, what could I say? Does God see all? Is it His work? For if it is, I dare not refuse."

Madge raised her head, but her whole frame trembled violently. She gave her mother one look of wordless pathos. Through all the dreary time of trial no pang had been quite so bitter.

"Perhaps it would be best."

The words were wrung from Mrs. Ashburton reluctantly

"I cannot realize it. May Westlake, with everything at her feet, praying to me, asking this pitiful favor! And I going in bonds as it were, knowing not what may befall me."

They parted quivering fingers, and Madge went to her room. Some impulse stronger than her pain urged her forward. But, after she had made herself ready, she returned to her mother with an undecided expression still upon her face, and a strange thinking in her eyes.

"My darling," Mrs. Ashburton said, "I cannot let you go without a word of warning. It may be that this young wife has failed to fill the heart of a husband, who, perhaps, is swayed by variable moods. Women are often unwittingly cruel to each other in these cases, keeping to the strict letter of the law, but losing sight of the spirit. Be merciful to her. In any event, it is too late even for friendship."

"I shall not see him at all," Madge returned, with a quivering voice.

"That is right. God bless you on your mission."

Jessie and the baby had been out for an airing; so, as the carriage was waiting, Madge sprang in and gave her orders in a low tone.

It seemed only a moment before they reached their destination, and the young girl summoned all her presence of mind and self-reliance.

The Westlakes had been home very little since the

Ashburtons' return to Riverside. Young Mrs. Westlake had always been delicate, and the birth of a child had not seemed to improve her health. Most of the previous winter had been spent in Cuba. They still had the reputation of being very gay, although society at Riverside saw but little of them.

Madge was ushered through the spacious hall and up the wide staircase, more elegant in their appointments than in the old days when she had first known them.

The servant opened the door without a word, and Madge, with a little awkward feeling, walked in unheralded. Pillowed in a reclining chair was a face and figure that startled her painfully — attenuated to the last degree, the cheeks blazing with an unwholesome scarlet, the eyes sunken and feverish, and the thin fingers shaking as in an ague fit.

“O, Miss Ashburton!”

There could hardly have been a greater contrast — Madge in the bloom of perfect health, the sweet, gracious nobleness in her face more captivating than any beauty; her full, erect figure, and the poise of the head instinct with dignity; the other wasted, anxious, trembling on the very verge of the grave, and still gasping frantically at the unfulfilled promise of life.

“I am so glad you have come! I could not die without —”

She was quivering in every pulse with excitement. Madge was deeply distressed.

“Will you sit down here beside me? First take off your hat. Ah! how well and brilliant!”

“I am sorry to find you —” and then Madge paused from delicacy.

“So near the grave! I have been fighting it off for years. O, it is cruel to die when one has — everything Does not God *ever* answer prayer?”

“Not always in our way,” replied Madge, in a low

sad tone. She, too, could have prayed with her whole soul that this cup might pass.

"I suppose I *must* die; but it is so hard! so hard! I heard about your staying with that poor Jenny Yates on the last night. Was it terrible?"

"Not her death," returned Madge, in a clear, tender voice.

"I have never cared about heaven. Somehow it seems so far off and cold. I try to pray, yet the one cry more earnest than all is, Life, life! But it cannot be."

She turned her face wearily on the pillow, and Madge saw the glitter of tears.

"I suppose I ought to have been more careful, and kept my strength. There never was much of it. O, how do people become resigned to death?"

Madge could not trust her voice to answer the pitiful cry, but she took May's little hot hand in hers.

"O, Madge! we used to be friends, you know. I believe I always loved Jessie best, because another cared for you, and I was miserably jealous. But you are so good to — to everybody, that I fancied you might pity me a little."

"Do you need my pity?" was the almost involuntary question.

"Something else as well — forgiveness."

"Let the past be forgotten, if anything in it troubles you," said Madge, in a tremulous, but sweet tone.

"I want to talk about it. I have been vain, and frivolous, and weak, and perhaps I should have committed the same sin if I had thought of it as possible. I was never very good, or noble, or unselfish, and when I think of you all at Home Nook, and how you have stood by each other through all the bitter trials, I despise my own useless, barren life. Not one noble deed!"

"It is our comfort that God does not judge us as we judge ourselves in moments of despair."

"Ah, but his eyes are clearer, and he sees all the faults

and littlenesses that we try to gloss over. So you must let me make what amends I can."

Madge could dimly imagine the confession. Would it be right to listen? But before she could resolve the tangled doubts, May had begun.

"You and Charlie were engaged — I knew that, and his mother only induced him to go abroad by promising to consent to the marriage on their return. I know he was honest enough to tell you that it displeased her, but he was also brave and chivalrous, and he loved you. When he would have returned, he was over-persuaded to stay; indeed, we could not have remained comfortably without him. So he kept true in the face of everything, even when he did not receive letters for months. One night while we were at Florence, we attended an American party, and some people who had known Mrs. Copeland were discussing your approaching marriage, said to be very brilliant for a poor girl. One hears an abundance of home gossip in this way. He scouted the idea; but a week afterwards he received a letter from you, briefly explaining that you had changed your mind, and asking him to burn your letters and forget you."

"I never wrote it!" interrupted Madge, indignantly.

"I believe that now. I know he does, too, though he has never spoken of it. In the heat of pain and wounded love, he came to me for comfort, and I—I rejoiced secretly. You know now how vile I must have been; but I never doubted the truth of that then. Our engagement was brought about by other influences than those of love, and I was glad to be his wife."

"O, hush!" cried Madge. "It can do no good now."

"I want you to know the truth. He was blameless. Out of the tenderness of his sore and wounded heart, he took me in. I meant to make him forget. I have nothing to complain of; he has been devoted to every whim, but I know he must have learned the truth. And when your

life is compared to mine, it is gold against worthless dross. I might have made it better — it is my shame and misery now. But I filled it full of eager, feverish amusements. I was afraid, if I kept quiet a day, some one would think me ill; as if the fact would not be apparent at last."

Madge listened in a strange whirl of thought. Was it any pleasure to know this now? Was it any joy to have her peace turned into tumult again, the peace for which she had striven so long and earnestly?

"You are silent. It is a difficult thing for any woman to forgive. And yet I cannot die without some token —"

"O, do not think me that hard and cruel," exclaimed Madge, vehemently. "And then you were not to blame."

"Except that, if he had been free on his return, the truth would have helped you both. I see all my selfish aims and desires."

"God knows that I forgave everything long ago."

"Forgive me now — not in this vague, general way, but from the depths of your soul. And pray for me that I may find some path out of this terrible darkness. For death is certain. There can be no reprieve."

Madge pressed the burning hand to her lips, and some pitying tears fell upon it. From the depths of her soul she did pardon. May had not committed the greater sin. From the pangs of her own love she sympathized with her profoundly. And bending over her, she kissed the throbbing brow.

"Thank you. When you were a child you would never say anything that you did not feel or believe. And the pure, white truth must be such a comfort in this world of deception. O, if — But it is too late."

"No. You have made all the reparation in your power," returned Madge. "You have cleared *him* from stain; so let it be placed in the deep grave of forgetfulness."

"How noble you are! And that he should have had a vain, shallow, fretful woman thrust upon him!"

"You loved him, and that must have redeemed you in his eyes."

"Will you look at my baby?" Mrs. Westlake asked, timidly, after a long pause.

A little girl, peacefully asleep. Pretty, waxen baby features, and a fringe of golden hair framing the fair, broad brow. The picture touched Madge with exceeding tenderness.

As she turned away silently, May held out her hand.

"I have something else to ask;" and the sad voice struggled with sobs. "O, Madge! when you are her mother, have a little pity upon us both. When *he* is happy with a happier wife, and other children cluster about his knee, do not let her be quite crowded out. She never sinned against you."

"O, hush!" pleaded Madge, her face scarlet with surprise and tender shame. "For he —"

"I shall fade out of his future like a troubled dream. I never was his strongest and most enduring love, though I might not have guessed it from any act of his, if my conscience had not kept the fact alive. He has been patient with all my caprices and frivolities. Why should I demand the sacrifice of his whole life? Only you will be a little tender to her? It is so hard to think of leaving her!"

The voice sank away to a dreary whisper. Madge Ashburton's heart throbbed with the deepest emotion. To be silent appeared cold and cruel; but what could she say?

"Promise!" entreated the beseeching voice.

It was such a solemn moment that the young girl's heart stood still with awe.

"You are so good to every one else — this was why I dared to hope. Have I sinned beyond the pale of pity?"

"O, it is not that;" and Madge tried to steady her voice — to think if she dared — if it were right.

"For her sake, poor sweet baby, who will never know how her mother loved her."

Madge knelt beside the sorrowful pleader. Had not the experience of her whole life been preparing her for some such moment as this?

"If it should ever be in my power to do anything for her, you may trust me," she answered, in a slow, solemn voice. "As for the past, it would be false and useless to say that I had not suffered; but I have overlived it. God gave me the trial for some wise purpose, and now I have grown tranquil and happy in my home duties and affections. I have accepted the life there fully and freely."

"You are so much better and nobler than I!"

"You look at me with indulgent eyes;" and Madge smiled, a little sadly. "I have had some hard lessons to learn, taken up many duties for which it seemed that I was scarcely fitted in the beginning. I have had to conform to these things by slow and often painful endeavor."

Mrs. Westlake studied the flushed face for many moments.

"I wonder if it comes natural for people to be good; and if not, how can they *make* themselves love and aspire to it?"

"I think the greatest difference is, that some *try* more earnestly than others. It is not easy — at first. There are so many mistakes and failures."

"And you had these?"

"I had many of them. It seemed to me that when we went away from Home Nook, I possessed courage, hope, trust in God, and the faith that inspires a Christian life. But as I learned to know myself better, as the waves and storms passed over me, sweeping away all false props, I understood how much had been the sanguine temperament of childhood, and a feeling that I was strong enough for myself. But God asks us to lean upon Him, to trust His strength, and not our own."

"But how to find Him?"

It seemed to Madge that she was still an ignorant child

in the way. How could she direct this poor, trembling, questioning soul? she who had gone so many times astray!

"He is nearer than we think," she answered, slowly "He listens to our faintest cry if we will but come to Him. When all other supports fail, His strong arm is stretched out — if we will but trust."

"I have nothing to give. A brief life, spent in thoughtless pleasure, wasting both body and soul. It seems cowardly to cry to Him now in my despair, when I can offer him no service."

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

That promise seemed so much better to Madge than any words of her own! For it was such an awesome and sacred thing to direct a human soul drifting on the broad sea of no belief, no faith.

"But would He take the very last, a fragment?"

The eager, feverish light in the eyes showed a depth and intensity, a desire to cling to something stronger than her own weak nature, that almost surprised Madge.

"He has promised to save to the uttermost. But you have been thinking of this before?"

"Yes. For a month I have not been out except as I was taken in a carriage. Auntie is kind, but it makes her nervous to stay in the sick room; and as I did not want to talk to nurse, I used to lie here and go over the events of my useless life, and the only step I could see clearly was confessing this wrong and desiring to make all the amends I could. I sinned at first unwittingly —"

"We will let that go," said Madge, in her grand, tender tone. "I know now that the fault was not all yours, nor his, and I am quite content. Do not ever give another anxious moment to the subject."

"How generous you are! I wish we had been better friends in the old days. And now, will you tell me what I must do next? I do pray, but it does not seem as if God heard. And when I look at my poor, foolish life, I feel as if I had nothing —"

"He will take us just as we are," Madge returned, softly. The dying girl sighed. "If I could believe," she said.

"And that seems the most vital point of all. Will you not take God's promises, trust them?"

"If I knew how. O, you cannot understand the terrible darkness and fear. I think of it until I could welcome the silence of the grave, if so be I might escape it all. Tell me about poor Jenny Yates. The nurse heard it from Catharine."

Madge repeated the story very simply, and in telling that, found a greater freedom for herself. She forgot the wrong and the trial, and her purest sympathies were enlisted in behalf of this poor soul, drifting so helplessly out to eternity. She put by all minor and purely personal considerations, and strove to do her duty faithfully. But presently she said, —

"I think we have talked enough for one morning. You must be weary."

"It can make little difference," returned May Westlake, sadly. "Yesterday, the doctor said I could have whatever I wanted, and must not be crossed in anything. You know what that means."

Madge gazed pitifully at the wasted face. It meant that life would be brief, at the best.

Mrs. Westlake could hardly bear to have her go, and clung to the firm fingers, that seemed so strong and restful.

"You will come again?" she murmured, beseechingly.

"If you need me — yes."

For there was still a gulf between them. Madge's delicacy forbade her accepting the position of a friend under these peculiar circumstances. But she had persuaded her to see Mr. Maurice, who, she felt assured, would lead her in the right path with all Christian tenderness.

After her return home, Madge sought her mother at once, and confided to her the particulars of the interview for she felt that she needed some guidance as well.

"Yet I am glad to know the truth," she said. "They have both been sufferers as well as I. If any prayer of mine could restore May to health, how thankfully it would be uttered!"

Madge Ashburton spoke but the simple truth. Her pity was honest and profound. The past had been over-lived, as she told Mrs. Westlake. She had accepted the duties of this quiet life cheerfully — a life in which there would be no extreme changes of mood, no fitful flashes of hope or despair. And now she strove to put by the excitement of the moment, and return to her wonted serenity. It was enough to know that honor and manliness had been betrayed, not thrust out of sight in mere selfish aggrandizement.

It appeared almost as if the prayer might be answered. Mrs. Westlake rallied again, and was able to drive out. From Mr. Maurice, Madge heard most encouraging accounts.

"She is learning to trust, to believe," he said, in one of their frequent conversations. "And yet what a case of spiritual destitution it was! Nothing but pleasure and gayety while she was able to endure it, and the darkness of despair when that light was shut out. Ah, it is well that God's mercies are infinite."

But when the light came at length, after long watching and many prayers, when through the real and personal acceptance of God's truth, May Westlake was made free, and tasted with great trembling and awe the bliss of believing herself God's child, she wrote to Madge the many things she could not have uttered, and thanked her with touching gratitude for all that she had done. "And though I should like to live," she said, "it is no longer terrible to die."

Madge gave thanks from the depths of her full heart. And when the next summons came for a visit, she went with little fear.

CHAPTER XXV.

CLEMENT.

"A LETTER from Clement;" and Philip held it up in triumph. "It is to mother, or I should have broken the seal. I am all impatience to know if it announces his return."

They were gathered on the wide porch in the summer afternoon. The lawn spreading out before them was a mass of greenness and bloom, and wafts of honeysuckle and jasmine were blown about by the soft south wind.

Philip tossed the letter into his mother's lap, and folding his arms, leaned against the vine-bound column.

"He is coming — will follow the letter speedily, he says, but not alone. He was married on the morning this letter was written."

Half a dozen wondering, eager faces turned towards her in surprise.

"I shall bring no stranger into the home circle, but one whom you have seen, and whom you must love for her own sake as well as mine; for her pure, noble soul, and unswerving truth. I know you will be surprised, yet I believe the love is only a more comprehensive outgrowth of my boyish fancy."

Mrs. Ashburton read that sentence aloud, pausing amid the various ejaculations.

"Doesn't he mention any name?" asked Philip.

"No. We may expect him in about ten days after the receipt of this."

"How odd and mysterious for straightforward Clement Nelly, you know the most about his friends — can you venture a guess?"

"I should have to consider. It is very strange, I think."

"He admits that it is a sudden resolve, but circumstances rendered it necessary, and will justify him to us, he believes," continued Mrs. Ashburton.

They were all silent, feeling that they would rather have welcomed him alone after this seven years' absence. There would be so much to say that no stranger could know or appreciate. Consequently they were hardly as joyful as they expected to be.

Madge was the first to recover.

"Clement has been very good and generous to us," she said, "and after this seven years of toil and exile, he deserves to be happy. We will not question, because he has chosen it in his own way, neither should our welcome be less warm."

The sweet and heartsome voice seemed to restore their wonted interest. Clement was a noble and tender brother, and they could trust him to choose wisely, or at least to be loyal to the old home ties.

But for the next ten days there was a great deal of speculation, and each tried hard to hope for the pleasantest of reunions. Eleanor, with her peculiar and painful experience, felt most anxious. For now they had all become so united that they dreaded any break. And she knew only too well the difference one inharmonious soul might make.

But the days flew by rapidly. The house was put in choicest order, and a pleasant apartment made ready for the new comers. Yet Madge sighed a little.

"It can never be quite the same again," she said. "Jessie will go away in the autumn, and when changes begin, one never knows where they will end. We have been so very happy the past year that I am almost afraid of the future."

Could it bring anything better to them?

Philip was to go down to the steamer and escort the

travellers home. A peculiar awe seemed to fall upon the household, that in all their discussions had never agreed upon any one person. And as the hour of their arrival drew nigh, every sound was noted with a strained and watchful anxiety. Madge laughed over her own nervousness.

The carriage swept around the drive at length, and halted at the steps. Philip sprang out first.

Was this really Clement? Taller and larger than Philip in every respect, bronzed by the burning suns of that far-distant land, blooming and bearded, and with the easy, elegant air of an Eastern prince in the books of their childhood. The familiar boyishness had long since disappeared. Not one trait that they remembered, hardly a feature that they could recall, and, perhaps, the first moment was one of disappointment as well as surprise.

Only a moment, however; for with the next he had clasped his mother fondly in his strong young arms, and wrung his father's hand, while his voice was lost in emotion.

"Dear mother! to find you all here again — alive and well —"

"Thank God for your return, my son, my son!" and the father's voice was tremulous.

"And for the rest — I believe I shall have to be introduced. This is Eleanor, I know —"

"And Madge and Jessie."

"I think I can faintly remember Jessie; but Madge far exceeds my expectations, having outgrown her twinship O, brother, and sisters, and parents, this is a happy day for me! And here is my gift to your household."

They had all watched the slight, girlish figure hanging on Philip's arm, and mounting the steps slowly, delicately giving them time for their first greeting. Now, as Clement took her hand, no larger than a child's, she raised her veil, and disclosed a face they had seen before indeed

Only the most genuine refinement of feeling kept the surprise silent on their lips, for it was Rose Stanhope.

"My wife," Clement said, in his rich, deep tone.

Her eyes were downcast, and a painful flush of embarrassment fluttered over her face.

Mrs. Ashburton broke the fast-growing awkwardness by a cordial embrace.

"My child!" she exclaimed, with motherly tenderness, "you are most welcome, even though you come as a stranger."

Rose raised her eyes timidly. They all remembered the last painful interview, she, perhaps, more keenly than the rest. Little did she dream then that there was ever to be a place for her in their circle.

Eleanor's movement roused both Madge and Jessie. It was no time to be cold and formal. And they felt in their secret hearts that Clement must have been convinced of the wisdom of this step before he had ventured to take it. So there were sisterly tones and pleasant words which bore the impress of sincerity.

Yet Jessie's exceeding delicacy felt the awkwardness of the position. Rose was blushing and trembling, and so near to tears that they caught the sound in her voice; so Jessie encircled her with a sisterly arm, and led her up stairs.

"O, if you will not — dislike me —" she faltered, her lip quivering like a child's in its intense emotion.

"We shall love you. It was only the suddenness. Nay, there is no need of excuses. Sit here and rest. You are tired and agitated."

Jessie unfastened the dainty hat and laid aside the mantle. Then she seated herself on a low ottoman, and began to take off the remaining glove.

"How kind you are! I have never had a sister, you know, and I scarcely remember my mother. You cannot understand how dreary it is to feel of kin to no one in the

world, and to realize that you are capable of loving and appreciating, and yet to be shut out — ”

“ Which you never will be again,” said Jessie, warmly.

“ I wanted him — Mr. Ashburton ” — correcting herself, “ to wait and tell you, but he would not leave me in Rome alone.”

“ It is just right,” returned Jessie. “ After you come to know us well, I think you will feel quite satisfied. We were not altogether right in the past, I am afraid, but it was so hard to judge.”

The baby woke at this juncture, and stretched out his hands. They made friends rapidly over him, after the fashion of women. He laughed and crowed, and went to Rose at once, burying both dimpled hands in her sunny hair, and studying her out of wondering eyes.

Jessie explained a few of the changes briefly, but in her chatty, confidential manner, which made Rose feel that she was no longer a stranger.

Down stairs they were coming to a better understanding as well.

“ I owe you some explanation,” Clement said to the others after she had gone. “ It was not possible to bring Rose back except as my wife, or the marriage would have been less hasty. She was staying at Rome with some friends, and we met quite by accident one morning. That evening she sent for me to talk over this odd business about Home Nook, and when I explained that your act had my fullest sanction and approval, I found that our continued refusal had been the source of deepest pain to her. Father, I think we all believe in our hearts that the man lying in a far-off grave wronged you and us. She feels it, too, though he was her father, and she loved him. With this explanation, let the fact be buried forever. It will matter little now. For the rest — a week in her society deepened an old, boyish impression, and solved the difficulty amicably. I need not ask you to love her

for my sake when you come to know her, for she is worthy of the dearest affection."

"Which she will receive from us," returned Mrs. Ashburton, warmly. "The sad, wistful face that turned away so despairingly at that last interview has haunted me many a time since."

"She envied you your love and poverty," said Clement, with a rare smile.

"Perhaps we were colder than the circumstances required. It was so strange, you know —"

"Mamma," exclaimed Madge, "I think we were a little unjust. I am quite willing to make acknowledgments. I suppose we remembered our pain, and hardships, and suffering, and felt them embittered by the fact of her ease and luxury, and our wrongs rendered us proud and bitter. But we have learned so much since then!" and the tears rushed to her eyes.

"My darling sister, is not life all one long, grand lesson?" and Clement drew her gently towards him. "I understand this so well! We felt proud of dear father's honor, and to-day I am most thankful that no man has been wronged through us. When we had given up everything, perhaps we felt a little tempted to glory in our sacrifice. But she, too, had made a point of honor with her conscience. You can never guess how the story of our misfortunes pained her. And through her I first learned —" and Clement paused, glancing at his father — "part of the story you kept from me;" and there was a sudden tremble in his voice. "She informed me that she found him blind. How has he been restored to sight? And why did you not tell me?"

"O, Clement, there was so much for you to do!" and Madge drew a long, quivering breath, akin to a sob. "From the first, the doctor held out a hope of a successful operation, and papa would not hear of this being added to your burden."

Clement laid his hand on his father's shoulder.

"God has been very good to us all," he said, with deep emotion. "I want you to feel that she had even then a sister's love and sympathy for you. It was very hard for her to be refused — shut out, as it were."

"And we were cruel in our coldness," returned Madge, with some of the old vehemence. "But you need never fear for the future, Clement."

"Our hearts have clustered closely around this dear old spot, for which we have made so many efforts. And I want you all to feel that *our* coming can make no difference. It must ever be Home Nook to all of us, the place where each one is most welcome, the centre of our family circle amid all the chances and changes. It is to belong to father while he lives, the gift of his children. For we have all toiled to this end, and God has mercifully crowned our labors."

It was true. Each one had borne a part cheerfully. Labor and sacrifice had gone hand in hand, and now they were all together once more, a happy household.

By the time Mr. Graham returned, they were all the warmest of friends. Clement was delighted to have them lay aside their prejudices so readily. Rose took her place in the circle with a tender and touching winsomeness, and Madge declared laughingly that she felt better acquainted with her than with Clement.

Indeed, it was hard to realize that this tall, handsome, foreign-looking man belonged to them. Nothing about him was familiar. The rich, mellow laugh was like a waft of music blowing up from a strange shore, and the easy, indescribable grace and indolence amused Madge wonderfully.

She and Philip sat alone on the porch a long while that evening.

"It is just like a dream," she said, with a happy ring in her voice. "I think now that there couldn't be a more

delightful solution of the problem. And I honor Clement for making the place really and truly papa's."

"Clement is a noble fellow. Somehow I cannot help feeling glad that a little good fortune has come to him. You know he will put nearly all his money in the house. Rose, he said, would have no marriage settlements at all, and insists that she will never touch the sum placed in trust. It will be enough to give Clement a fine business position somewhere. I like this old-fashioned notion of perfect confidence in one another."

"Since Clement has been most loyal and unselfish with us, we can trust him in all things else. I think *she* will never need to question his devotion or integrity."

"No, indeed."

And then both were silent, going over in their own hearts the paths by which they had been led. How they had all changed since the old days—shaken off the crudeness, the hasty, unreasoning beliefs and prejudices, grown broader, more generous, more truly loyal to God, more tenderly considerate of each other! The path had been marked by many tears, many failures, many despairing moments; but here and there a Bethel had been reared, on which the angels had descended, and it would never be so dark again, for God had become the light thereof!

For a while there was quite a gala time. Every old haunt had to be revisited by Clement, old friends looked up, old stories told. By degrees he learned the many struggles they had not thought worth while to trouble him with, since it would hardly be in his power to relieve all.

He had insisted now that Philip should resign his position as head of the family, and be free to follow out his first plans. At the same time Philip received a most excellent offer from the firm. Mr. Osborne was about to retire, and since the firm was in a sound and prosperous financial condition, Ward had persuaded his father to make this generous proposition.

"It is more than kind in Mr. Graham," Philip said. "A sure road to competency in the course of the next ten years, and an offer that is seldom made to a young man with no capital."

"And you will hardly let it slip," returned Eleanor. "For I think we have all learned that a wise and judicious use of money benefits our fellow-creatures as well as ourselves. Industry and prudence are commended as highly as mere selfish aims and grasping covetousness are held up to abhorrence."

"But Philip's old dream was to be a physician, you know," said Madge.

"I believe it is my dream no longer."

"O, Philip! Surely your seven years' toil and waiting should have some reward."

He smiled gravely, and was silent for several minutes, while the others watched him.

"I believe I never realized so thoroughly our dependence upon God as during my illness and the discouraging months that followed. Not that I could do this all at once. I had many dark and despairing hours, many hard struggles with doubt and unbelief; but I felt that if I lost Him I lost everything, and when I could do nothing but cling blindly, I never quite gave up my hope. I placed my life and my future in His hands, and I found consolation in the hour of trial, strength against temptation, tender well-springs of gratitude, and fervent trust. With my firm belief and my wider knowledge of the world, my soul began to yearn over all those thoughtless ones rushing swiftly down the path to destruction. When we believe firmly and truly that those who do evil shall enter into condemnation, no heart can be so cold or cruel as not to desire to snatch them from the rapid and dangerous current. I felt then how high and holy a work it was —"

Philip's voice faltered a little. Mrs. Ashburton crossed the room, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"I understand it, my son," she said, in her soft, sweet tone. "God has called you to a higher and holier work. And it seems, since we have been prospered, dispersed and gathered together again, kept through many dangers, and allowed to meet once more in the full possession of life and health, we owe Him some thank-offering. What better than that one of our number should be consecrated to His service?"

"If He will accept my humble and earnest endeavor, and allow me to labor in so glorious a cause. He seems to make the way plain for me now. I have discussed the matter with Clement, who heartily approves. You will not stand in need of my services at home, and I can readily give up the prospect of personal advancement and fortune."

"God speed you," said his father, solemnly.

There could be no objection. Philip had performed every duty faithfully, and they all felt that he ought to be free to follow his own wishes.

"It is nobler," said Madge, long afterwards, as they stood quite alone uttering their good nights. "Not but that any sphere in life can be made worthy; but this, with its high duties, seems to bring one nearer to God, and has in it fewer selfish aims. And that you should have thought of it so long ago! But if you had enlisted, Philip, or at least gone away?"

"That was my sorest trial; I will confess it now. A clergyman's hands, of all others, should be clean and pure, not stained with a brother's blood—though God forbid that I should misjudge those who have given their lives for the cause. But I saw no other resource at the time, and made the sacrifice, trusting to God. He opened a door of escape."

They both smiled, though tears shone in their eyes as well.

"Clement is so good! This will be a pleasant home for

all of you, though in a short time dear Jessie will have her own pretty nest, and perhaps Nellie another. So you will be the only home daughter."

Mr. Graham's house in the city was approaching completion. It would appear odd to do without Jessie, but it was best. When Philip's resolve was finally settled — and the elder Mr. Graham considered it a very foolish one — the business offer was transferred to Clement Ashburton and accepted.

"The name of Ashburton will have an opportunity to redeem itself, after all," said Philip, in delight.

Madge, in the mean while, was making occasional successes in her undertaking, enough to give her a feeling of independence so far as her personal wants were concerned. Miss Hetty's Home occupied a large place in her heart.

Madge Ashburton would not be one to delight in prosperity for selfish uses. She had learned her lesson too well, and the knowledge that comes through suffering is generally purified. Her heart would never be narrow nor cold, neither would her eyes turn carelessly away from suffering. Whatever her station in life might be, Christian virtues would ennoble it.

Eleanor's friendship with Mr. Wyverne had at length merged into an engagement — not without much earnest consideration and humble, fervent prayer. She went to her mother for tender counsel; now, indeed, none of them were shut out of her confidence.

There appeared no good reason why she should refuse so true and noble a man as Mr. Wyverne when he had won her esteem and affection. Miss Wyverne gave her a sister's love already, and both were exceedingly fond of little Greta. Why should she shrink from accepting love and tenderness for the ashes of a dead hope?

But Eleanor's soul had grown clearer since those old days. How bitterly she despised herself for aims and feelings perverted, the fear and selfishness to which she

had yielded! Was she worthy of a good man's trust? Did she dare accept happiness after having once recklessly crushed the best hopes that can light a woman's soul?

Tremblingly did she accept, and that not until Mr. Wyverne had heard the past with its mistakes and failures.

"I think you blame yourself too severely," he said. "At that time you hardly understood your own soul and its needs, and you did try earnestly to do your duty. Under more favorable circumstances, you might have been happy, and made another so, even if it was not of the highest type. But I hold that you have amply redeemed your errors."

"Thank you," she murmured from her full heart.

"But the marriage will not be at all hurried," she said afterwards to her mother. "I want to be quite sure that I am right this time. I cannot plead youth and inexperience for any mistake that I may be led into now."

They had all taken very cordially to Clement's wife, and, as he predicted, they soon loved her for her own sake, giving her something of the regard that had always been Jessie's; for, indeed, they appeared nearer alike. Nought of the past that might have proved painful was ever referred to, and they came to understand presently how her high and unswerving conscience had led her to desire to make all the amends in her power for an unconfessed wrong.

A happy household indeed, grown stronger, tenderer, and still more brave by the many trials, finding in daily duties a daily recompense, the peaceful tranquillity like a precious balm poured into wounds, soothing, healing all that was painful.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LILIES AND RUE.

MADGE ASHBURTON, lingering in a shady corner of the balcony one bright afternoon early in September, listened to the slow tolling of the bell that counted out the brief human years of a young soul. She knew that a month ago Mrs. Westlake had insisted upon another change of air for May, who had rallied beyond expectation. But it was the last effort of physical forces. This morning she had been brought back shrouded and coffined, and now they were performing the last sad rites over her.

The few interviews had been peculiar from the nature of the situation, and in some respects exquisitely painful, the one going regretfully out of a place that her inmost soul told her she never should have filled, the other understanding the deeper joy and blessedness which she might have entered into with the keen and high spirit-appreciation belonging to her nature, all the tender and satisfying experiences May had missed. Yet she had to shut her eyes upon them, to put them out of her reach and out of her thoughts before any passionate grief or longing made it a sin.

She had thrust it out bravely. In all the after life, whatever came, there would be no stain, no shame, in remembering this summer. She had learned to have faith and patience in God's way, instead of her own impulsive desires. She would not even be tempted to dream over the future.

In her hand she held the last note the trembling fingers had written. "At peace!" it said, "waiting for the final summons, a little happier if she could have seen her dear

friend's face once more, but content to go. That all thorns should be taken out of the past was her constant prayer, and that some day Madge would come to think of her as a sister, forgiven, but not forgotten."

There was some mention of the generous love which had so blessed her life, although she had not come in at the door, but climbed up some other way. Neither would she grudge her the memory of this in the years to come. Her life must have been brief in any event.

Did Mrs. Westlake's conscience rise up in judgment as she took her last glance at the sweet, cold face? Had her falsehood and treachery worked any blessing or benefit? The fortune on which she had cast such longing eyes fallen to a helpless, motherless child, for Charles had steadily refused to share it. Her son, grave and sad beyond his years, restless in spirit, ready to leave the shadowed home, and plunge into any business that promised distraction of thought; her money and offers refused, herself lonely, wearied with the frivolities of life, and with no peaceful refuge, no children rising up to call her blessed. Had she wrought wisely?

Madge dropped some sorrowful tears. It was sad to have lives wrenched from their first foundation, to grow over gnarled places which had once been keenest wounds, and put forth green leaves and blossoms for the world. Is it for the world alone? Does there not come a blessed consciousness of something higher? Do not pains and sufferings, and even temptations, bring us nearer to the One who bore them with His own heavenly patience? Has He not promised to watch and to remember in the day when He makes up his jewels? Is it waiting his time for recognition that is so difficult for us?

The bell ceased its mournful sound. A moment later it would be "dust to dust, ashes to ashes." In the redundancy of physical health and strength, the thought sent a shiver over Madge. She put on her hat, and wandered

slowly down the road. Unconsciously the Home had come to be a place of rest and refreshing for her, and thither she wended her steps.

Miss Hetty was sitting in the wide hall, swaying gently to and fro in her low rocker. At Mrs. Rachel's request, she had not worn mourning, and through the summer she kept to the old-fashioned lawns and fine gingham that had done duty in past days. She felt best in them, just as she always loved best to walk among the beds of sweet-william, lavender, rosemary, and marjoram, the garden ornaments of a past generation.

She looked cool and quaint, a bit of in-doors lying against the brilliant sunshine, and making a fine contrast.

She was singing, too, in her cheery voice, that had an underlying sweetness in spite of the quavers that broke it now and then. Madge listened.

"The Lord into his garden comes,
The spices yield their rich perfume,
The lilies grow and thrive.
Refreshing showers of grace divine
From Jesus flow to every vine,
And make the dead revive."

She saw the flutter of a dress, and paused in her singing, leaning out a little, her face breaking into a glad smile.

"O, Madge, my dear child, I was thinking of you a few moments ago. Come in."

"I'll sit here a little while, Miss Hetty, in the doorway, after the fashion of children. How are all the invalids?"

"Very comfortable indeed. It has been quite an idle day. And you are all well?"

"Yes."

Madge leaned her face on her hand and fell into a little reverie. They were both very beautiful to Miss Hetty, the slender, shapely hand in its whiteness, the soft, peachy

cheek, the waves of bronze-brown hair, and the eyes with their lustrous tenderness. Sometimes, in her elder-woman's way, she wondered a little about the young girl. But what never had been, would be in the days to come. It was not likely that one so sweet, and bright, and winsome would miss the centre that she was born to grace.

"My dear," she said again, softly, "does anything trouble you? But there, I might have known! It's Miss Jessie and the baby going away, and your brother. But then — it isn't like a long separation."

Madge roused herself, thankful there was some excuse for her gravity.

"The break will come hard at first, I suppose," she replied, while a faint smile drifted about her face. "But then we have Rose and Clement."

"I never saw just such a family. Mr. Graham is like an own brother, and you have taken in Clement's wife with the same kind of love. Some folks can hardly agree with their blood relations."

"But they are both so lovely in themselves. It is an easy matter to be pleasant when every one is good to you."

"Most people see the faults so much sooner than the virtues! If there was love enough in the world to keep the wheels running smoothly! Or if they would try half as hard to be generous and out-giving, as they do to be sharp, and queer, and selfish! As if the Lord did not make the whole world for each one — just the same sunshine, and sweet smells, and pictures, green fields and running waters! And when He sets children in a family, they have only to reach out their arms like the trees, to make a pleasant shade about, or sift the sunshine through. There are the spring and the buds, the summer and the growth, the ripening autumn and the fruit. God minds all that; so why should we be afraid to give out the sweetness? There will be more to-morrow. It is like the manna. Just

for to-day, and no lack. We need not be afraid of wearing out love."

"No." Madge smiled at the quaintness. "But I think, Miss Hetty, that real and great sorrows often bring people nearer together, and make them less captious and critical. When they try to help each other they find out the undercurrent of tenderness and affection. When all the world seems a desert, they cling the more closely together. I sometimes feel that we should never have known how grand and lovely Eleanor was but for the bitter trouble."

"And she is coming to a better happiness. I often think a young girl's first love is not always the true test of her nature. It looks reasonable that a woman whose judgment has matured, who is stronger, wiser, and nobler for her experience, could love in a more worthy fashion, if it come while life is still sweet to her. And if two people ever were made for each other, it is Eleanor and Mr. Wyverne. And Miss Clara hasn't a bit of grudging jealousy. She is too grand for that. They'll bring many a happy moment in her life. And so, my dear, you will be very glad to have Mrs. Clement."

"We have always been glad since we understood her a little better. Indeed, she is just like a younger sister. I wonder now how we did without her so long."

"It has all come about like a story. I often wish sister could have lived to see it. But I suppose it is best. I could not have thought so much of these poor souls if I'd had her to love. When the Lord takes one thing away, he restores tenfold. And that reminds me — why, I've the strangest thing to tell you — it has hardly been out of my mind till just now. I couldn't have dreamed of such a surprise if I had tried."

"Another donation, or another patient?"

"A donation; but you never would guess! I was that much astonished that I could not believe it at first. It is the Lord's hand, my dear; I see that as plain as the day I'll go and get it."

In the familiar room which opened on the hall, the room with its old furnishings and antique Indian secretary that Madge always remembered so well, Miss Bright has laid her treasure.

A plain white envelope, with her name in a bold, clear hand, that sent a tremor through Madge's whole frame. It was well that Miss Hetty was so engrossed that her agitation passed unremarked.

"You would hardly believe it, but I knew it for God's own work. Mr. Westlake came last night, just in the edge of the evening. I scarcely recognized him at first. I should as soon have expected the king."

By this time Miss Hetty had the envelope open. There was a check, with a paper folded around it on which was written — "For Miss Bright's Home. To be devoted to the sick and the needy as she thinks best. The gift of a dying woman — May Westlake."

"O!" and the tears filled Madge's eyes. She understood it even better than the recipient.

"It is for a thousand dollars! I never had such a surprise in my life. I should as soon have looked for the moon to fall right into my lap. He talked a long while about her, and said she had been so much interested in Jenny Yates's death, though at that time she could hardly resign herself to a thought of the great change coming to her. I used to think her a foolish, flighty little thing, but I take it all back now. She changed a good deal in the last two months, he said, and at last saw her way quite clearly. Mr. Maurice had visited her, and I am sure an angel from heaven couldn't make things plainer than he does. A few days before she died, she wrote this out, and asked him to bring it to me as soon as he could, and tell me that she began to understand the worth of useful lives. He wanted it done before she was buried."

"It was thoughtful and generous of her," Madge returned, softly, trying to still the great throbbing at her heart.

"He asked me so many questions about the house, and how I came to think of having a hospital. He wanted to hear about Miss Jessie's fortune too, and how you all came back to Home Nook. It may be an old woman's fancy, but I do believe he cared a great deal for Miss Jessie, and it just flashed into my mind—if the fortune had been hers sooner—"

"It couldn't have helped or hindered," said Madge, with a gasp. "And Jessie never—"

"No, that comforted me again. And she loves Mr. Graham so very dearly! You can see it in her eyes whenever she speaks of him. But somehow I do believe the young man's life has had a gnarl or a tangle in it—I can't quite make out. The madam, you know, was very proud and haughty, but he is noble and good to the very core. He sat here and called me Miss Hetty just like the old times. It is plain to see that his heart is not in the money or the grandeur, for he thinks of going away somewhere and trying business. And there's his poor little motherless girl! I declare it made the tears come into my foolish old eyes. After all, youth seems the time to be happy, and I can't help fancying that he has missed some of the sweetest. Maybe the Lord will make it up to him in the end."

Mrs. Farrand was coming down the stairs just then, and Madge was thankful for the interruption. Her heart was too full to take up indifferent topics; so, as soon as she could politely, she bade the ladies adieu, in spite of their entreaties that she would remain to supper.

Once out of sight of questioning eyes, she gave way to her long-repressed feelings. It was seldom that she allowed herself the luxury of tears, but now they flowed forth unrestrained, and were a relief. She understood and appreciated the delicacy that had led Charles Westlake to keep her name in the background. It was strange, indeed, that Miss Hetty's clear sight had been so led astray in the

earlier days. Madge was doubly grateful now, for comment on this point would be the one thing she could not endure.

If they thought of it at home, no one made any sign, unless it was to be tenderer to Madge. And at this juncture there was so much to divide attention! Philip was preparing for his college term, and Jessie made daily journeys to the city, often taking Madge for a companion. The new house was being furnished, and Madge declared that she luxuriated in extravagance, enjoying every dollar that Jessie spent. Her fortune had been re-invested very profitably, but she felt there was no necessity for her to be adding to it, and it seemed, with all the abundance, that it was no more than right to share some of her blessings with the household. And in her home they were to be no strangers. Clement and Rose were to be chief householders at Home Nook. Nellie would be married and gone by another spring, in all probability, and dear mamma would be in demand at every home.

"For I cannot imagine our forgetting and falling apart, as some households do," Jessie said, as she sat in her mother's room the evening before Philip's departure. "If it is our troubles, and sorrows, and struggles that have bound us so closely together, I am almost ready to welcome them, now that we have come to sunshine once more."

"I am thankful that we have had these pleasant weeks with each other," Philip replied, "for I suppose it will never be quite the same again. But, mother dear, where you are will be the rallying-point for us all. I am glad that Clement and Rose have so planned that it will always be here."

"Dear Clement," said the mother, fondly. "And yet each one of you has borne the burden and heat of the day. I cannot tell you, my dear children, how doubly sweet your sympathy and assistance have been. Amid the losses and perplexities, each one has won something for this life, and I trust for the life to come."

"Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy *does* come in the morning, — some morning when we are not looking for it," said Jessie. "And it has come blessedly to us."

"Yes," returned Philip. "Our gains have not been small. God has given us beauty for ashes, and the oil of joy for mourning. I sometimes look over the path by which we have been led, and its lessons sink deeply into my soul. We have learned that no wrong or thoughtless act stops between God and our own conscience, but bears its fatal fruit wide spread."

"And causes misery to many innocent souls," said Madge. "It is not true that he who sins always bears the heaviest punishment."

"It seems to me that God desires to teach us by this one indisputable fact, that humanity is linked together from this brief life to the far-reaching one that is to come after, and that while we make any compromise with wrong, we are rendered just that far incapable of decisions which are pure and honest."

"And yet it does seem hard to suffer from the faults of others. I cannot make out how far any one has a right;" and Madge paused, one of the old troubled looks crossing her face.

"My dear," said her mother, "we are not asked to make it out. We puzzle our heads over judgments and punishments as if we could find out all of God's ways, when He simply asks us to bear something for His sake, to prove our love and devotion. He, being innocent, suffered for the many, and I think, besides the grand doctrine of the atonement, it was to teach us that lesson, also. Wherein we have suffered innocently, we have followed a little in His footsteps."

"I had not thought of that."

"And we become the more careful of our own actions. Every relation of life has its own responsibility. We may hurt and hinder others through some selfish aggrandizement of our purposes that may look fair enough to our-

selves from the outside. But we are to go deeper than that. We are to sift our motives. For He reads those."

"And to learn that charity comes to mean, in daily life, a wise, tender, and generous forbearance, a helpful heart and ready hand; that holiness is no mystic, far-fetched quality, but an ever-living power, penetrating both soul and body, bringing humility, righteousness, and faith in its train. For close to us all is this living presence of God. We have only to reach out and take."

"But you have so much faith, Philip. You see things so clearly!"

"I have left the darkness behind! I remember the day I enlisted. I said, I am here to do whatever God wills. If He open no other door, I will walk in this path, fulfilling its duties to the uttermost. And when He set my feet on high, how could I help but believe and trust?"

"And my happiness came through that," said Jessie with a sound of tremulous joy in her voice.

They thought of another cloud that had brought its silver lining to the day. No one remembered it now with any sense of wrong. Rose's tenderness would have shamed them all if they had.

"And we have learned that duties and blessings abound in the lowly paths of life as well as the loftiest," said Mrs. Ashburton; "that brothers and sisters, parents and children, can bring forth good fruit in the simplest of daily work. And you, my children, have done this. It is not only high heroic deeds that bring a sweet reward. And when we comprehend how really grand a thing it is to live, we desire to give back to God the fruit of our progress, our growth in the graces of spiritual life. And now, my darlings, good night."

"I shall often miss the dear old home," said Philip, lingering at the door. "But I know that I shall keep my place in your hearts, and one of my happiest thoughts will be the reunions to come."

On the morrow they said farewell to him. What a fine, manly soul his was! Truth and honor were ineffaceably stamped on his countenance. There would be no weak shipwrecks for him. He had been tried already "as by fire."

Then Jessie began her preparations. A few trunks and boxes to be packed, — for the furniture was to remain, — part for Madge, and the rest for her mother. After she was fairly settled, Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton were to pay her a long visit.

They missed the baby wonderfully, for Greta had been nearly taken possession of by Miss Wyverne. Hardly a day passed that either Madge or Eleanor did not make a flying call at the new house to have a glimpse of Jessie in all the glory of her pretty matronly ways. Mr. Graham insisted that presently they meant to take possession of Madge, adopt her and her genius legally.

Mr. Wyverne would fain have had his marriage before the holidays, and pleaded earnestly that it might be so. Why Eleanor desired to wait until spring, was not very clear to herself.

"There have been so many changes and leave takings!" she said. "We must become a little used to these first, and not have too many vacant places at once."

"But you will be so near! It is only such a very little change," he pleaded. "And you are quite sure of your own heart this time?"

"So sure that if aught came between us, my love would still be yours. It seems as if it must have begun with my very life. Do you know I sometimes feel afraid of its power and strength? Have I been growing in vehemence?"

He glanced into the eloquent, dark eyes. She was a very beautiful woman in this full maturity, and appealed strongly to his æsthetic sense. He watched her as one would a rare flower.

"You seem to be unfolding into a fuller, freer life, my darling; and I am glad to think that it is through me, and for me. Because our sympathies are so in unison, our tastes and feelings so much alike, I long to begin the new life with you. I am not afraid to dare it with my comparative poverty."

"As if you did not know how little these things move me now;" and she smiled radiantly. "I am no romantic girl, as you are well aware, and yet the life with you would still be a pleasure to me if it were toil and sacrifice. If you were sick or unfortunate, I would gladly take your place: if any sorrow came, Heaven only knows how ready I should be to share it."

"Why do you think of such things? You have had enough of them in your life. It will be my whole study to shut them out. While I cannot give you luxury, I can bestow upon you comfort and the tenderest love."

"Perhaps it is because I want to make myself sure of my affection that I try it by such tests."

"I think sometimes that you are morbidly conscientious. When you have had years of happiness, you will smile over this."

Eleanor repeated part of the conversation to Madge afterwards.

"I think you have a curious feeling about it also. But, Nelly, there *can* be no mistake this time;" and she studied her questioningly.

"If you mean about the love,—no, I would go to him to-morrow, any time he might ask. I never dreamed of loving any one in this manner. Is it making idols?"

"No, Nelly, not while we feel that the loved one is worthy, and that God holds all in the hollow of His hand. It must be right to give of our best, when we have the highest in return, as well. God doesn't weigh and measure to us. And though I came to sad and sorrowful times, it used to comfort me to think the love was so sweet

while I had it. I am glad that you can be happy, my dear sister."

"Perhaps it is because I feel that I deserve so little of it," returned Eleanor, wiping away a few tears.

"Nelly," began Madge, after a pause, "we can both take a lesson from Jessie. She didn't worry about what had been and what was to be. She took the joy that came to her, and was exceedingly thankful, and she bore the trials with a sweet patience. I think the secret was, that she lived in to-day, and found it broad enough and high enough for her. And God means that we shall enjoy what He sends us, even if it is taken away presently. Doubt is sometimes as bad as positive ingratitude."

The girls kissed each other fondly. Madge felt a secret sympathy with Eleanor's past suffering, that was deeper than Jessie's joy. They two were growing into peculiar kinship, although they had appeared most antagonistic in the beginning.

Had Eleanor Copeland some vague presentiment that held her back from entering fully into the promised enjoyment? "In the spring," she said; and there she remained impregnable. If God meant that this great happiness should be hers, she would take it then thankfully.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CROWNED WITH THOENS.

"A LETTER for Eleanor," said Clement, on his return from the city one afternoon.

"She and Greta are in the garden with Miss Wyverne;" and Rose ran eagerly to carry the message.

Eleanor opened it with careless haste, as her correspondence was generally mere business notes.

A long, closely-written letter in a hand whose familiarity made her shiver. She cast one quick, frightened glance at the signature.

"O, Eleanor!"

For it seemed at the first moment as if she would fall to the ground. Miss Wyverne clasped her arms around the swaying figure.

"Let me go in," she entreated, faintly.

Her face was deadly pale, and swift, shivering spasms ran through every nerve. Clara Wyverne supported her to the steps.

"Not bad news, Nelly?" queried Clement, in astonishment.

"Strange news, at least," she replied, shudderingly. "Excuse me."

How she found her way up stairs she never knew. The blackness of darkness seemed around her in thick clouds. She threw herself upon the bed with a cry of anguish.

Mrs. Ashburton, hearing the sound, went to her.

"You are ill, my child," she exclaimed, in alarm.

"Ill! O, mother, mother! have I not borne enough? Is there no end to pain and trial?"

"My darling!"

"You do not know;" in a weak, wandering voice.
"He has come back — is in New York."

"He! Who?"

For it appeared as if Eleanor's senses were deserting her. The lips were quivering and bloodless, the eyes wild and appealing, as if vainly searching for help, refuge.

"Gerald Copeland! O, mother, mother!"

Mrs. Ashburton was speechless from surprise. Eleanor crushed the still unread letter in her hand.

"O," she moaned, "how could he let me think him dead all these years, and then return! It is cruel."

Eleanor's strong, impatient sense of justice burst out there. Perhaps, too, the terrible consciousness that she no longer loved him, and was still his wife.

"My child, it cannot be!"

"It is too true. I have not read the letter, but it begins, 'My dear wife,' and is signed with his name. O, Heaven, how bitter!"

Mrs. Ashburton bent over her child. What could she say in this hour of anguish, when all human comfort seemed unavailing? For she realized with a mother's keen pain and sorrow that this was no ordinary trial, no even tolerable surprise.

She roused herself from her impotent moaning at length. "I am so weak, after all!" she murmured, brokenly; "but it is terrible! To begin a new life, and then find myself chained to the old. Let me read my letter."

She smoothed out the crumpled sheet, and her stony eyes wandered over it without taking in the sense. Only the one fact found lodgment in her brain — Gerald Copeland was alive!

Alive! He had been in America but a fortnight, and with the curious kind of fortune that often befalls these thriftless souls, had again come in possession of considerable property. He had made inquiries, and now desired to

see both Eleanor and their child, and begged her to forget the past. There had been a strange misunderstanding, but he believed that he could explain everything. His regard for her had not changed through years of separation, and now he desired to share his good fortune with her.

"Read it;" and she placed it in her mother's hands, burying her face in the pillow, but not to weep. She seemed stunned, quite incapable of any feeling beyond a sense of bitter wrong and pain.

Mrs. Ashburton bent over and kissed the cold cheek, which seemed to have turned to ice on this glowing autumn day. Why should this have fallen upon her child? Surely they had all borne enough.

Eleanor stirred presently, and grasped at the arm encircling her.

"Is it not some horrible dream, dear mother? He surely cannot be alive! How could my letter have been returned with that announcement?"

"It is too true. My darling, I thought we had come to brighter times. I rejoiced so in your happiness. God only knows the bitterness of this cup. But he will give us strength to bear it as he has in the former trials."

"I tried to endure the other bravely. It was the result of my own weak cowardice, and the evil of being too easily persuaded. But this — O, is there any help?"

Her despairing look and pathetic tones almost unnerved Mrs. Ashburton. She kissed the trembling lips again and again, while her tears fell softly on Eleanor's cheek.

"My darling," she said, "you are not utterly wrecked, though many glad hopes go down with this. You will have much love, and sympathy, and assistance."

"Yes, the brightest hope! I don't know why, but it never appeared quite right to accept Mr. Wyverne's love. Did I have some presentiment? And though it is hard to give up a dream so exquisitely sweet, still that is not the bitterest part."

She shuddered violently, and lying there with her closed eyes, looked as if she might indeed go out of life without any difficult struggle.

"For he must have known that I considered him dead. Why did he allow me to believe anything so false? And if I had taken any step!"

"A higher power has saved you from that."

"Thank God!"

Eleanor Copeland uttered this from her full heart, most grateful that she had not complicated her destiny by any hasty act.

"Mamma," she said, presently, "you must go down to the others, for the dinner will soon be brought in. Tell them all afterwards, but do not let me be disturbed. It is best that I should be alone to think."

Her brain was in a state of mental chaos. She could only hear the throb of her temples, and feel the dull ache of every nerve. Even the sense of outraged trust, of betrayed hope and love and all tender emotions, scarcely moved her. She bowed her head to the storm, and let the waves sweep over her, half wishing they might drift her to some kinder shore.

Clement made some inquiry as they took their places at the table, but Mrs. Ashburton's grave reply hushed present inquiry. They were not prepared for the story she had to tell them, it appeared so utterly incredible at first.

"Then she was not with him at the time?" Clement remarked.

"No. She heard of his injury and illness, but it was difficult to leave her school, and the letter she sent was returned to her with the announcement of his death."

"Then he must have known of it. I am not sure that the law can hold her as his wife if she wishes for freedom. At all events he has forfeited his claim upon her."

Madge was in the wildest consternation, and espoused Clement's views warmly. That Eleanor should be made so suffer anew appeared unpardonably cruel.

"We must hear more about it before we can judge clearly," said Mr. Ashburton. "These questions are too momentous for a hasty decision."

Mr. Wyverne called that evening. Madge ran up to Eleanor for counsel.

"I cannot see him," was the sad answer. "Ask him to send Clara to me to-morrow. O, Madge!"

"It is too hard, Nelly;" and the aching temples were pressed against the warm, fond heart. "Must it be? Is it necessary to give him up, and he so good, so noble, so capable of making a happy home?"

"Child, don't tempt me!"

Eleanor's voice was husky, and the feverish hands shook in the fond clasp.

"Go. Don't tell him to-night. Clara may think of a better way."

Then she was left alone again until her mother crept softly in through the darkness to comfort her, as only a heart so faithful and tender can comfort.

Madge went slowly down to Mr. Wyverne. She had told him a few moments before that Eleanor was ill with a headache. Now she said, —

"She must be excused this evening. And she begs you to ask Clara to come over as early as she can to-morrow morning."

"Madge," he exclaimed, with the quick alarm of love, "you do not apprehend a serious illness. I surely have a right to know."

He was watching her so closely that she colored under the scrutiny in spite of her effort to appear calm.

"It is not illness," she returned, hurriedly; "that is — she will be well again in a day or two, and can explain all."

"What is there for her to explain?" and he smiled, with a touch of humor. "Do you suppose I am going to be such a tyrant that she will have to account for a simple headache?"

Madge laughed at the absurdity, though the tears in her throat almost choked her. How cruel that Mr. Wyverne's hopes should be dashed to the ground in an instant! She had taken so much pride and enjoyment in thinking of Eleanor's future, and her affection for Mr. Wyverne was full of sisterly strength.

He remarked presently that she seemed absent and strangely excited, and after leaving many kind messages for Eleanor, bade Madge a kind good night.

"O," she exclaimed to Rose, in tones of anguish, "how can he ever be told! And it is no fault of his."

"This Copeland has been a villain all the way through!" declared Clement, indignantly. "He will find there are some deeds that cannot be easily forgiven. And she is by no means friendless."

When Eleanor arose the next morning, it seemed as if she had undergone a long fit of illness. Her limbs still tottered at every step, and her head was dizzy with the confusion of thought. But, ah, how kind and generous they all were! If she had been so fond of them years ago, this might never have happened.

"Circumstances must guide me," she said, feebly, in answer to the arguments of the others. "Of only one thing do I feel certain. I am Gerald Copeland's wife, and while he lives I can be the lawful wife of no other."

All through her sleepless night she had been making this resolve, and now she uttered it with a certain haste, lest she might be tempted to weakness.

"O, Nelly!"

"But he has forfeited all right —"

"I married him of my own free will — I can never forget that;" and Eleanor's quivering voice touched each heart. "He is Greta's father, and I have no power to set aside her claim from any selfish consideration. If I had been braver and truer in those girlish days, this might not have come upon me. But now I desire to do only that which is right."

"The law might give you liberty —"

Clement's sense of the cowardly injustice Eleanor's husband had dealt to her roused his warm impulses.

"I feel that there is a higher right than mere human law."

Her voice was very faint, and the pale lips quivered.

"You surely do not mean to go back to him after this unpardonable neglect?"

"I do not know. I cannot think."

"We will look at the question in all its bearings before we decide," said Mr. Ashburton, gravely.

"I must see him. He has asked for an interview, and I can judge better then what his claim really is."

If they could have saved her any pang, how gladly they would have done it! All the best hopes of her life dashed down at a single blow! for they felt that her attachment to Mr. Wyverne had been true and strong, and understood that Gerald Copeland could not win back her heart, since he had lost even his light hold upon it. But a fiery trial lay before her, from which they would fain have shielded her.

Clara Wyverne was more deeply shocked and surprised than the rest had been. She had prepared herself for some trouble, but such a blow was quite beyond the wildest dream.

"I want you to tell your brother," Eleanor said, amid her tears. "How deeply I regret bringing this sorrow upon him and destroying his bright hopes, I can never express in words."

"And you think your decision final in any event?" questioned Clara.

"I desire most of all to do right. God will bear me witness that I never had the most remote idea that Mr. Copeland was still alive. But whether I go back to him or not, I feel that I have no claim to any other true and honorable love."

Clara understood that this was just, even if painful.

"I cannot distort any law or reasoning to my own purely selfish wishes. God has permitted this revelation just in time to save me, to save us both, and I must heed him. I want to keep in the shadow of his guidance and protector, knowing then that I cannot wander far astray. Of my own pain, and shame, and suffering, I cannot speak."

Miss Wyverne felt that she was right. Hard as it was to go against the best hopes of a lifetime, there was something higher than mere personal desires. To be able to put away the longing, aching self, was a victory more noble than the enjoyment of happiness.

"Will you see *him*?" Clara's tone was very low.

"Not at present;" and the pale lips quivered. "I think he, too, will feel that we shall be stronger to do right if we make no compromise with wrong. To see his pain would be more than I could bear."

"I believe it is best."

"And I can trust you to explain all. You have been too kind a sister to me to desert me in this hour of need, or make my trial harder to bear. I will not say, counsel him to forget me, but let him look upon me as some friend forever lost out of his orbit."

Miss Wyverne kissed her sadly, tenderly.

"You are too noble to have your life blighted in this manner," she said, with deep emotion.

"We sometimes suffer for old sins."

It was this that gave Eleanor much of her courage. A little through pride, and ambition, and weakness, she had suffered herself to be misled, and now the wrong-doing had brought its own downfall of tender, yet blind hope. Since she had been satisfied to marry Gerald Copeland without the purest and highest love, she would accept the bitter sacrifice, take up her burden, without casting about for loopholes of escape.

"I want to say one thing," Miss Wyverne began, after a long pause. "You have had my brother's entire love. No woman ever came very near his heart before, though he admires and reverences the sex. I think from the first you both suited, harmonized. It is quite possible for people to love who cannot render each other happy, who cannot go to the depth or breadth of the other soul, and this rare appreciation was my great pleasure in you both. It would have been such a happy marriage! and Heaven knows they are sadly needed in this world."

"O, don't!" pleaded Eleanor, in anguish.

"Forgive the pain, dearest friend. But I must say a little more. I understand him so well! It may be a comfort in some hard moment to know that through the year, to come his steadfast soul will never waver. He will see, as you do, that the bar between is of higher making than man's; but no other will ever fill your place. It will always be sacred."

Eleanor pressed the hand, but dared not speak. And yet she was inexpressibly comforted. Both her lover and Clara recognized the higher right; they would not tempt her by weak human persuasions.

"You will not shut me out?" Clara said, softly. "Let me keep the sister's place that I was to have. At present my coming might be productive of pain, but when you have resolved upon your course, let me come and share some of the burdens. I never had a sister of my own, and you are doubly dear to me."

Eleanor could only sob out her thanks for the tenderness and the delicacy.

The parting between the two was sad indeed, but Clara's friendship was true and strong. Perhaps Eleanor, in her depths of anguish, hardly realized what bridges of tender trust a woman's affection might rear for trembling, clinging souls to walk over.

"But it is so hard!" Madge exclaimed afterwards. "I cannot make it right or just."

"I think God teaches us, by slow degrees, that this is just what he does not want us to do. He has made the right and wrong already. When we go astray, he bids us bear the punishment of it, and not question the wisdom. We are not to form laws for ourselves."

Madge was silent, though her tears dropped quietly.

"I am thankful that Mr. Copeland came back in time to prevent any complication."

"But if he had never come at all!"

Eleanor shivered.

And now that one painful duty was over, Eleanor nerved herself for another. The whole household had objected strongly to her again placing herself under Gerald Copeland's protection. Clement had insisted that his home should be hers, and Rose had joined him most cordially.

Eleanor made several attempts to write to Mr. Copeland, but the words would not come at her desire. It did seem best that she should grant the interview he asked, allow him to tell his story, and listen to the justification he might offer, if any were possible. For it appeared to her that the letter could not have been returned without his knowledge.

She finally sent a brief note, stating that he could see her at Home Nook, in her father's house, if he was still desirous, on second thoughts, that the meeting should take place.

Ward Graham and Jessie were not behind in tender sympathy. They, too, had been fairly stunned with the first tidings. Ward inclined to Clement's view of the matter. Mr. Copeland had forfeited all right to her, and, no doubt, sufficient proofs could be found to procure her an honorable freedom.

He had interested himself in making minute inquiries, and found that Mr. Copeland's record had not stood fair from the beginning. The small fortune inherited from his

parents had been squandered, and by the time his uncle's handsome legacy reached him he was deeply in debt. Shortly after this he had met Eleanor Ashburton. To do Mrs. Waltham justice, she had not heard the darker side of the story. He was well connected, and no worse than the majority of idle young men. A wife would give him just the tone and steadiness that he needed.

She reasoned that the marriage would be a good thing for him as well as for Eleanor. But he would not have taken a penniless girl. The false impression given by Mrs. Waltham had decided the matter.

An elderly maiden aunt had endowed him a third time. The will had been made before his supposed death, and never altered. By the merest accident he had heard of it, and presented his claim.

"He is a spendthrift," Mr Graham declared. "It will not do for Eleanor to put faith in any of his promises. In a few years she would find herself reduced to poverty again."

Eleanor Copeland waited in a strange mood for the coming of the man who had been her husband. The very thought of him made her shiver. They had parted coldly the last time. She, in a moment of indignation and energy, had declared that she would a thousand times sooner support herself and her child by her own labor than share the uncertain and degrading pittance of a gambler. But how would they meet now?

A man with a subtler sense of refinement and delicacy would have hesitated a long while before intruding upon the woman he had wronged in so many respects. But in Mr. Copeland's narrow and commonplace estimation, money covered a multitude of sins. He judged Eleanor by his own view of the world, not from anything that he had ever learned of her character. In his mere material opinion she would be glad to give up her life of toil, and, perhaps, dependence upon her relations, for the comparative comfort he was able to offer her again.

That there were some black facts in the past he could not deny to himself, but he meant to gloss them over. He had no such special regard for the truth that he would be likely to hesitate at any small infraction; besides, he had one of those natures in which strong desire outruns purer motives. His wish to present a matter in a certain light nearly always made it appear so to him in the end.

So it happened that he was much more calm and assured when he presented himself at Home Nook than she who had been so sinned against, and was so earnestly striving to do her duty. It is not always the most blameless conscience that is entirely at ease.

She came down tremblingly. How much both had changed in these few years! For Eleanor carried the impress of a pure, high soul in her face, and her steadfast eyes, that had wept so many bitter tears, were grave and clear, so sure to detect insincerity that he winced under their first slow moving glance.

He had grown old rapidly. The boyish beauty and freshness had disappeared, and in the sallow complexion, sunken eyes, and generally wasted appearance, one could read marks of dissipation and neglect. Was she to blame that she shrank from him, that no old chord of tenderness was awakened?

He reached out his hand.

"Eleanor," he said, with a strange fear and trembling, quailing before the dignity and purity of the woman who had gone so far beyond him when left to herself.

She took the hand coldly. Every instinct within her seemed roused to aversion. He could not help remarking the slight shudder.

"O," he exclaimed, with sudden vehemence, "you will not be hard and cruel, Eleanor, when I need you so much! That I wronged you deeply, I confess; but I desire an opportunity to make amends. It is in my power now."

She motioned him to a seat. Somehow she was hardly prepared for this fervent pleading.

"That there are some explanations due me you must admit," she answered, slowly. "Upon hearing of your danger I sent a letter, which was returned to me unopened. with the announcement of your death. Friendless and almost penniless in a strange land, what could I do but return to my parents, who, in the depths of misfortune and distress, generously gave me a shelter? You provided for me out of your abundance, they of their poverty and self-denial. Judge to whom I owe the highest duty and gratitude."

A dull flush suffused his pale face as he glanced at her in amazement, every nerve quivering at the sound of her clear, calm voice, more forcible than the bitterest upbraiding.

"I was thought dead at the hospital," he began. "It must have been during this time that your letter came."

"But how could they have known my address?"

There was no evading her with a clumsy excuse. His justification was weak at the best, but he was quite ready to patch it up with any convenient falsehood.

"The nurse knew. I asked her to write one day;" which was true enough. "I am quite sure she directed an envelope. But she was called away then, and I remember nothing for long afterwards. My recovery was very tedious. I wrote to you as soon as I could, but received no answer. When I was strong enough I went to Brussels, for I was longing to see you and our child; but you had returned to America."

She would never be able to know how much of this was true. Perhaps she had been too glad of her freedom — accepted it with unwise haste.

"But here are the years between. Did you care so little whether I were living or dead that you never made an inquiry until now?"

"I knew you were with your relatives, happier, no doubt, than I could have made you then. I would not drag you back to my poverty. When I had gained a little something I meant to seek you; but I was unlucky in everything I undertook. But when the news of this fortune reached me, my first thought was of you. O, Eleanor, I want you to believe that! I ask you to share comfort and ease with me. I am a changed man. I have given up the fatal evil which brought us both so much misery. You shall have nothing to complain of in the future. Only come back to me. God knows that I never grudged you anything when I had it, and you shall have *all* now, to do just as you like."

He broke into a fit of weak crying — not the deep sobs that shake a man to the living centres, but a kind of disappointed, impatient sorrow, as if she wronged him by her greater dignity.

Were these protestations love? Could he neglect her, leave her to want, and suffering, and a danger like that she had so narrowly escaped, and fancy that a few tears and a little pathetic repentance could make amends? She saw clearly the shallowness and selfish under-current of his soul, and turned away sick at heart.

"I have a story to tell you also," she said when she could command her voice. "If it excites your anger and blame, remember that your silence and absence have led to this fatal result."

Briefly, yet with a certain unconscious pathos, she confessed the pleasant friendship that had so recently ripened into an engagement. He suffered through his narrow groundless jealousy and fear of loss only, for he was incapable of anything higher. The years that had gone on ennobling her had done little for him, since his associates and habits had verged towards the lowest.

"But my claim is the strongest, Eleanor; you must admit that," he interrupted, impatiently.

“Whatever claim or right Mr. Wyverne had, ended on the day I received your letter. I shall never see him again willingly until we can meet as the commonest of friends. You have nothing to fear from that unfortunate episode.”

Were the lesson and the contrast nothing?

He went on with his entreaties. Her beauty and grace, her sad dignity and quiet manner, that did not utterly repel, woke the old, impulsive tenderness that she had mistaken for love before. He might deceive himself, but she had grown too surely wise to be blinded by this specious fondness. She had learned by sad experience to distinguish between the real and the counterfeit.

“But I am your true and lawful husband,” he exclaimed. “You cannot deny that. Your friends may seek to prejudice you against me, or you may —”

She checked him there with her glance of conscious rectitude.

“Whatever step I may take in the future, I want you to understand that Mr. Wyverne will have nothing to do with it. While you live, I shall not be the wife of any other man, even if the law set me free to-morrow. I hope you have still sufficient manliness to feel that I shall try to do what is right, irrespective of any weak or selfish desire.”

He studied her with a startled look. Was there some depth in her soul that he had never fathomed? Was there a knowledge beyond his comprehension, even?

He had counted on the new fortune being his most effectual ally, and that she should treat his offer to release her from toil with indifference, amazed him. He had judged her by his own narrow, selfish, indolent nature. And now, although her truth and dignity held him, outwardly, in awe, he was, at heart, afraid of his rival. But he did not dare threaten; so he had recourse to pleading again.

"Give me time," she said at last, torn by conflicting thoughts, and the fear of judging too severely. "I can decide upon nothing immediately. Leave me to think it over by myself. You will hear from me when I have resolved upon anything definite. And now let us end this painful interview."

Her pale face and strained, sorrowful eyes moved him. He came forward and would have clasped her in his arms, but she shrank back; so he had to content himself with kissing the cold lips.

"You will forgive," he said. "You *will* give me another chance! For now, Eleanor, I could make you so much happier! Can you refuse to try?"

"If I only knew what was right, or what might be demanded of me," she said, wearily, finding refuge at last on her mother's faithful heart. "For while my forgiveness is pardoning all past acts that have pained or injured me, he makes it comprehend the future. How can I bring myself to accept life with him?"

"It is one of those matters that cannot be settled with an hour's talk," said Mrs. Ashburton. "If you still loved him!"

"Ah, mamma, that is one of the bitterest dregs in this hopeless cup. I cannot shut my eyes to what I have known. I cannot put the false for the true. I have had a glimpse of blessedness such as I hardly dreamed of in my girlhood. Jessie's happy marriage, and intimate contact with two such men as Mr. Graham and Mr. Wyverne, have opened my blind eyes. I should be ashamed now to bring Gerald Copeland in our midst, to ask Clement or Philip to receive him as a brother."

"With these feelings it is hardly right to attempt life with him. There is a limit to human endurance."

"I have tried in vain to think that I could love him once more. I cannot!" and Eleanor shuddered with aversion.

After a few days she resumed her wonted duties. By day and by night she seemed as if girt by fire. To see on the one hand the sweet and ennobling life, the richness of love and truth that she had but just touched, like the hem of a garment, and been made whole; yet to understand that the healing in its most joyous and comprehensive sense was not for her; to be thrust back to the wilderness of doubt and perplexity, her whole future irrevocably shadowed, — appeared at times more than she could endure.

But she was not to be left in peace. Gerald's friends and relatives, who had paid her no attention beyond their first visit of condolence, became aware of her existence. One cousin, who had been very attentive during the marriage, visited her now on Gerald's behalf, and insisted that his conduct had been really noble.

"That he should have been content to live in silence and obscurity while he could do nothing for you, and come to you the instant he had anything to share, is to me a proof of the utmost devotion. Perhaps his remaining abroad was the best thing he could do after that fatal misunderstanding."

"It might appear so to some women," Eleanor responded; "but before that I had to support myself and my child. He squandered his fortune recklessly, he spent night after night at the gaming table —"

"You must let by-gones be by-gones. Gerald was a little imprudent, we all know, but he has reformed entirely. Yet if you throw him off, who can answer for his future? Is it not sending him to ruin?"

"He did not think of that when he left me to struggle alone," Eleanor answered, with dignity.

"My dear, women have more resources and fewer temptations, and a man is peculiarly dependent upon his wife. For disguise it as you may, you *are* his wife. I dare say you were very well satisfied to marry him. I thought it a perfect love match on both sides, for you

know in his position he might have married a much richer woman."

Eleanor winced at all this.

"And you know separations, even on the best of grounds, always create a wonderment and scandal. I desire to see Gerald happy while he does live, for I doubt if it is a great while;" and the lady sighed. "We all want you to come down for a visit at our house, where, I think, the matter can be amicably arranged. Mr. Mountjoy is exceedingly desirous on Gerald's account, and to me he is a very dear cousin, as you can hardly doubt. My best wishes are for your welfare."

"You are very kind," returned Eleanor. "I have been so racked and tossed about with conflicting emotions that I feel myself utterly incapable of a decision at present."

Mrs. Mountjoy kissed her with much warmth, and reiterated her invitation. No wonder Eleanor shrank from these hollow professions. Had she, indeed, held the great world of society in such fear and esteem only a few years ago? Aunt Waltham's golden idol, whose feet of clay crushed out all high and noble aspirations—must it choose for her again?

Her own family strongly negatived every proposal of Gerald Copeland's.

"We can never receive him as a brother," said Clement, decisively. "He has wronged and neglected you, and allowed you to return home destitute and forsaken. More than all, he must have known that a young and attractive woman might have opportunities for a second marriage. I call it the refinement of cruelty!"

"I do not believe he ever thought of such a contingency," said Mr. Ashburton, more temperately.

"Which shows his utter selfishness. He did not want to be burdened with her and the child then. Father, I cannot gloss over such unmanly cowardice. We must not pervert truth. Honor, and right, and justice, are always the same."

"True, my son, and yet it is our duty to give him the benefit of the widest charity. Still I should be most sorry to deliver Eleanor a second time into his keeping. It is my continual regret that he ever had a claim upon her."

Eleanor crossed the room, and clasped her arms around her father's neck.

"Dear papa," she said, "no one shall be blamed for my sad mistake. I believe in those early days I felt proud of my own strength and judgment. I thought I could weigh, decide, and understand clearly. I was quite sufficient for myself. I am afraid my vanity led me into a false and dangerous estimate of my own powers, so that I was the more easily led astray by counsel that appealed to my self-love. If I had been brave enough to face circumstances. But I was not, and had to learn much by bitter experience. I loved no one else, and I did like Gerald Copeland. His desiring to marry me in spite of the reverse of fortune appeared particularly noble. He seemed to care a great deal for me; in short, worshipped me; but I feel now that it was not any individual quality in my nature or soul. But if he had remained that tender, I should have gone on, and been a comparatively happy wife, not missing, because not realizing, the higher bliss. On one point my conscience is clear. When I understood how little love I had to help me, I was all the more earnest to do my whole duty. God knows how many times I thrust back the angry response, was patient, quiet, ready to be entertaining and affectionate, and beguile him from his evil ways. I felt that some other woman might have loved him dearly, and I resolved that he should never miss any tenderness on my part."

"My own dear girl! You have indeed gone through the refining process."

Eleanor brushed away the glittering tears.

"Perhaps I needed it. God has taken thousands of years in his processes to bring one thing to perfection.

The 'cunning workmanship' may stand for a higher type than we know in human souls. I felt, first, that it was exceedingly bitter to have been allowed to love Mr. Wyverne, since it was not of my very own seeking, yet I have come to some blessed truth even through that;" and her faltering voice betrayed her deep emotion.

"And loving him, it appears a positive wrong to yourself to go back to Gerald Copeland," declared Clement.

"But I have no right. No, don't tempt me—I am weak enough of myself. Just to have seen this possibility and be forced to put it by, to go on in blindness and darkness, holding God's hand, and walking in the path He opens. I could not feel free even if the law made me so."

Rose stole softly round and slipped her hand within Eleanor's.

"Don't try to persuade her," she said. "The steadfast truth will keep her soul pure and clean, and there is a peace promised. God *does* make a way out for those who trust in him."

Eleanor bent over and kissed her.

"But she cannot go back," persisted Clement.

"God will make it plain if we wait a little."

"Rose, you are an angel!" Clement said. "We all need your patience."

Mr. Wyverne had nobly stepped out of the complication. He had found a brother musician to supply his place temporarily, and he and Clara had started on a long contemplated tour, which of late had merged into his dreams as that of a happy bridal. One letter to Eleanor had explained his feelings, and kept both from the pain, and, perhaps, unwisdom of an interview. But he had felt in his first passionate sorrow that he could not look upon the sweet face he had lost without seeking to bridge over the way to her.

His absence, therefore, left her free to come and go, to solve the sad problem, if it were possible, in the way that her conscience could best approve.

"I feel that Eleanor is nobly right," Ward Graham said. "It is hard to obey a law when it goes directly against all our desires. And yet there is too much rending apart hastily of the most sacred ties. It is for worse as well as better, and so long as life lasts. We can understand the benefit of permanence when we look around upon the world; but every one thinks his or her case is exceptional."

"They might have been so happy!" returned Jessie, longingly.

"Yes, that is where we hesitate. In our weak, short sight, we consider happiness the greatest good; but it may appear of more worth to God to let some life be spent in living out a great and noble truth. The remembrance of those who fought a good fight is like a beacon light to the world. It cheers feeble souls who are trembling in the balance, and may assist some other to persevere in the way."

"It is hard to be the example;" and Jessie smiled through her tears.

"Yes, my darling; and when we are in the fullest enjoyment of happiness it is doubly painful to shut another out. I wish to-day that Eleanor were free, and my sense of justice rebels against Copeland being rewarded for his years of dissipation and neglect by the care of a pure and noble woman, whose finest feelings would always be an unknown language to him. On the other hand, has she a perfect right to put it out of her power to see and minister unto him, if occasion should require? He has reformed. He asks no outward sacrifice of her. He could render life comparatively easy for her and Greta, and in his weak, sentimental fashion he loves her."

"Then you think she ought to return."

"No, I don't say that at present. He is comfortable with his cousin, and the idea is too new, too absolutely repulsive, for her to accept immediately. I should be

sorry to see her thrust aside Mr. Wyverne's love so soon. God's times are not as ours, and a little waiting can work no harm."

They all sympathized with Eleanor in the tenderest manner. The great anguish they could not bear, for there are sorrowful gardens of the soul in which one must forever walk alone; but the watching and the prayer may be rendered more comforting by the sweet solace of friendship. He who went before to be our glorious ensample suffered it in darkness and desertion.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE vexed question was settled at length by an interposition of Providence. Eleanor seemed to have waited breathlessly for this sure sign.

They had all spent a happy Christmas-tide at home, the children gathered in the olden circle once more, even Philip joining them for a brief visit. A quiet, heartfelt happiness had pervaded each; love, the outgrowth of years and tender development; faith, having had her patient work, now bringing forth fruit.

Mr. Wyverne and his sister had returned, and Clara had taken the first opportunity to visit her friend. Eleanor had resigned her position in the church choir, and sat in the old pew with her parents, desirous of shunning any publicity that might lead to embarrassment. And, indeed, much of her time, latterly, had been spent with Jessie, as the greater portion of her pupils were in the city. Perhaps, too, she liked the strong influence of a clear-eyed man like Mr. Graham, the insight that took hold of things beyond immediate grasp.

Just after the holiday festivities Eleanor received a message from Mr. Copeland, and another from Mrs. Mountjoy, begging her to come immediately, as Gerald was ill. This she could not refuse.

She had in a dim manner been expecting it, and was surprised to think how unconsciously she had held herself in readiness. How she had contested the old ground inch by inch, no one but God would ever know. She had thrust out temptations and longings that were not for her. She would not fall again, willingly.

The natural consequences of an irregular and somewhat dissipated life began to show themselves, though a severe cold was the primary cause of their present development. And once in the house with him, Eleanor was compelled to listen to his never-failing arguments.

"I do not see how you can grudge me this little comfort, Eleanor," he said, pleadingly. "It won't be long. You and the baby will be left in very comfortable circumstances. Few women would refuse so persistently."

"I have told you my reasons before," she returned. "Gerald, the fact of your being again independent does not move me at all. I have taken care of myself and Greta when I was homeless, and now I have friends who would not allow me to suffer, who would gladly relieve me from all toil, but that it is not pleasant for me to be a burden on their kindness. You may measure your love by your readiness to provide for me now, but —"

"What is the use of flinging that forever in a man's teeth?" he exclaimed, impatiently. "I meant to do the best. You said you would not live on the money earned in *that* way. It was my only resource."

"Yes, I had a horror of it always. It seems to me like downright robbery, and it was the wages of sin."

"We'll let all that go. I've given it up. I shall never play for any stake again. Though, for that matter, I had a right to some of it. I lost enough, surely;" with a grim smile.

"I do not wish you to think that any money could buy me back. I might be convinced that it was my duty. When I hesitate, it is because I feel that the old love I once had for you is dead beyond a peradventure. I have tried, but I cannot even galvanize it into false life. I could be your nurse, your friend; I could be patient, and kind, and attentive, but —" and she shivered a little.

"Well, I am willing to take anything," he said, pettishly. "I love you well enough to want you on any terms. And I must have my child."

Love! Did the man, in his blindness, think he understood the word in all its fullness, in its out giving, self denying capacity? Her deeper experience filled her with something like scorn, almost—for the impatience was checked, and the tender sense returned. If the man was not capable of anything higher and loftier—

“Yes, you are full of the new ideas—affinities, and all that. I’d be satisfied with just the plain old love. You did care for me once!”

“I did mean to be a true and tender wife. O, Gerald, can you not understand that you let it burn out—that you threw it from you as a thing of no value? It is my misfortune that I cannot love through so much, that I cannot be thrust out and taken back; starved, and then restored by repletion. That is my nature. I suppose I cannot alter it any more than you can yours.”

“But I am willing to forget it all.”

Was he so much more generous than she? A careless observer might have thought so. And yet he would do little, thoughtless deeds hourly to pain her, while she would carefully abstain from even these petty crosses. They were unlike in the beginning, and had drifted farther apart with every tide.

Could she consent? Could she take up the life, and be true to it in thought as well as deed, not hungering for the greater happiness that might have been hers?

“O, God,” she cried, “show me the right way! If it be over thorns I will still walk in it.”

Then she decided, suddenly, one day, and her heart seemed at rest.

“Gerald,” she said, “I will come back to you. I will do whatever I can to make your life happy. If I am less bright than formerly, you must remember that my experience has not been of the kind to make or keep me joyful.”

“I shall not bother about that,” he made answer, grasp

ing at her hands and kissing them in a hungry fashion. "You will love me, I know, when we once get settled. Why, it will be like beginning a new life!"

The wistful, half-incredulous pleasure lighting up his face sent a chill to her heart. Could she make him happy?

"You are in earnest?"

"God helping me, I will do my best," she answered, solemnly.

"It was made so clear to me that I could not refuse," she said to her mother. "I prayed earnestly, and the light came. I have only to follow it, trusting in God."

They were all a little disappointed for her that her destiny should have been made so clearly manifest. Yet it was too great a question to be covered over with specious reasoning, or thrust out by careless hands. And she was not one to pass by on the other side.

To Clara Wyverne she did open her heart. To be misunderstood by the man who had once read her very soul, who could have ministered to the finest impulse of her nature, was too great a sacrifice even of her lofty self-denial. She knew that the confidence would be appreciated, and taken just as she gave it. Then she bent all her energies to her new life.

Mrs. Mountjoy was one of those women who are delighted to be deep in the affairs of other people; planning, managing, and sometimes stirring up strife, more through ignorance than ill-will, however. Now she was delighted with the success of her endeavor; but her counsel was inexhaustible.

"It is hardly worth while to go to housekeeping," she said, with the utmost complacency. "You can be as comfortable, and have much less care, by taking a suite of rooms, and the society will be pleasant for Gerald. You would want to spend the summer out of the city in any event."

"I shall like it better," returned Gerald. "I don't want

Eleanor to be bothered with the details of a louse and servants, and in this way we shall be free to go wherever we like. I think I should try Florida, or Cuba, another winter."

Eleanor made no objection. Under the circumstances she would much rather have had a home to occupy her attention, or, at least, distract it a little from the one channel. But she had resolved not to thwart Gerald. If the new fortune lasted through his life, it would be sufficient.

In the course of a few weeks they became quite delightfully settled. Gerald was all brightness and solicitude, and much interested in winning his little daughter's affections. But the narrow jealousy of the man could not be entirely hidden, if he had so willed, and he was not one to make any earnest endeavor. When the matter was finally decided, the Ashburtons, for Eleanor's sake, had made some friendly overtures. There might have been some latent feeling of shame aroused, but it was more petty vanity, wounded by their actual superiority. He could never be any kind of hero to them. His repentance they might accept, but they could not hold it up and admire it as a noble deed. He shrank from their truth and penetration, and he dreaded their influence over Eleanor.

She felt that the old pleasant home-life must be given up in some degree. He was not at ease with them, neither did he like for Eleanor to visit them alone. In truth, after the first gratification and pleasure of having gained his point, and her also, was over, the man came back to his vapid, ill-managed self, with the added irritability of failing health. He had been so used to excitements and stimulants, and the constant change of society, that Eleanor's reading and music seemed tame indeed. The boasted love was not equal to solitude with her.

What could she do? She used to ask herself the question at times in a terrified, helpless way. It might stretch on for years and years. Could she endure to the end? Would the grace be sufficient?

The alternations of temper were very difficult for little Greta to understand. Having been used hitherto to a tender, equable home atmosphere, the being petted and scolded almost in a breath terrified her. Her mother's judicious management was quite set at nought.

When Eleanor Copeland accepted her destiny a second time at Gerald's hands, she hardly looked for happiness, but she had not expected such an utter dearth of moderate enjoyment. The trifles that made up his life were well nigh insufferable to her—gossip of the day, extravagant, highly-wrought stories, men of an exceedingly commonplace stamp, whose principal associations were second-rate actresses, and who could tell the time and pedigree of every well-known horse. She could see that these interested—other things wearied.

Was it her duty to lower herself to this commonplace round? Certainly he had degenerated since the first years of their marriage. Sometimes she turned away heart-sick. But it was too late to go back.

No one knew the straits and perilous ways through which she passed. She did not dare look at the future. She clung to the grace that was promised as sufficient, and tried to keep herself tranquil, garnering what store she could from the pleasant days to keep her through those that were more trying.

Jessie and Mr. Graham proved their love and relationship in many ways. Their carriage was often at Eleanor's disposal, and Greta's great joy was to go to aunt Jessie's and play with little Ward, who was fascinated with his cousin.

When the spring had fairly opened, and pleasant weather set in, Gerald grew more restless, and began to plan pleasure-trips. Eleanor accepted the change thankfully. Greta was sent to Home Nook for the summer.

"A child is always such a bother in travelling!" Gerald had said, and Eleanor was glad to have her in a better ordered household.

They had been very happy at Home Nook. Rose and Clement had within themselves stores of interest and experience, and to both the relations of home were rarely delightful. Clement's long absence had but strengthened his love, while Rose was thankful to have such a tender mother as Mrs. Ashburton. Madge was bright and winsome, and did her best to make amends for Eleanor's absence. They understood that they could not cordially fraternize with Mr. Copeland, and, with the refinement of wisdom, refrained from adding to Nelly's burden.

They understood better from Greta's childish prattle what it really was. Now and then the child would quote "papa;" but in the main, she was reticent beyond her years.

That summer a new member was added to the household — Clement's baby. Somehow they could hardly realize that Rose was the mother of it, she looked so like a child herself. Greta was wild with delight.

Philip spent much of the summer at home. He and Mr. Wyverne were the most cordial of friends. Indeed, Mr. Wyverne had fallen back into his old place with them, with the one great difference that was never spoken of between them. No one was more rejoiced than he at Greta's advent.

"Isn't it strange how the child loves him?" exclaimed Madge. "Has she some dim presentiment? For I do believe Mr. Wyverne will wait all his life."

Mrs. Ashburton sighed a little. Would Nelly's lines ever fall in pleasant places again?

Madge had a letter from her one day that she brought to her mother to read.

They were en route for Minnesota. Gerald's cough was much worse again, and the doctor had ordered them thither. They would remain until the weather became too cold, and then go to Cuba, without returning east. Gerald wished Greta placed in some good school, but Eleanor thought her too young.

"And so I ask the favor, dear Madge, that you will give her a little motherly oversight. I know, in the depths of your kind heart, you will do what is best, and that the others will not think her too much trouble. I am glad to have this pleasant refuge for her. She is in much better hands than she would be with me. And, my darling, pray that I may have strength to endure to the end, that I may not fail or fall away from the sure help."

"O, mamma," exclaimed Madge, "what a pity that any person's life should be such that their death can scarcely be regretted! It would be useless for us to affect grief. We shall be relieved at Nelly's freedom. And yet I do feel sorry for Mr. Copeland. Why do you suppose God gave him so much? Everything seems just to have come to him. He was a handsome young man, and had all the advantages of a liberal education. Then three fortunes have kindly fallen into his hands, and a beautiful, noble wife crowned his way. For, even in her girlhood, I think Nelly would have made a grand wife for a man who could appreciate her."

"It does seem a great mystery when God showers so many blessings upon one who appears incapable of using them to his own benefit or that of others. Yet it must serve some wise purpose."

"Mamma, I do believe it puzzles you a little bit. Confess, now! When there are so many people in the world who could have used it more wisely, blessing their kind. A wasted life, nay, worse, for he has made others miserable. It does not seem to point any moral at all. And his repentance was just as weak and superficial as his character. I do believe if he had found Nelly looking old and miserable, and none of us improved in prosperity, he would hardly have insisted upon taking her. And although he pretended to care so much for Greta, you see he would be quite willing to have the shy, tender little thing go among entire strangers, when he knows that we loved her so

early. I cannot understand such an affection. He never thinks of another person's happiness."

"There is a great deal of selfishness in the world;" and Mrs. Ashburton sighed.

"He never pauses to consider what Eleanor likes. No matter how tired she may be, if any whim seizes him he must have it gratified. I wonder, sometimes, how she can be so sweet and patient."

"I used to have more fear for Eleanor than any of the children," replied Mrs. Ashburton. "As a young girl, she was quietly persistent in her own way, as if that was much better than any counsel. She had a fashion of almost despising the common things of life, and the homely, every-day virtues. Perhaps she needed just this experience."

"There has been a very perfect work in her, I am sure. But, mamma, when Mr. Copeland improved so much in the spring, I could not feel reconciled to the idea of his recovery. It was wicked, I suppose."

"It was a snare for evil thoughts, at least."

"But how could one help seeing? And yet his life is as sweet to him as mine, no doubt. I have observed that people whose lives are of very little account cling to them the most tenaciously."

"The wheat and the tares are to grow together until harvest, you know. Our short-sighted faith might root them out and destroy them; but God, who is wiser, bids them stand. All their lives have in them some thought of His, though we can only see how they push, and hinder, and vex better growth. And He gave the barren fig tree another season."

"As he has to Gerald Copeland. Mamma, it is a very solemn thing to live, after all. And what if our sheaves should be all tares and wild flowers instead of wheat?"

"It is our daily work to make ready for the grand harvesting. How God deals with others must not occupy so much of our attention that we forget ourselves."

"Yet we can hardly help it when their deeds affect us so much. Even He said, 'Offences must needs be, but woe to him through whom they come.'"

"That is the part to be left with Him, dear. His thoughts are farther back, from the beginning. And every day I am thankful that He gave Eleanor courage and strength for this duty. It is clearer than ever to me, though I could hardly trust when I consented."

"We believe more, the nearer we come to the end of a thing. But, mamma, could we feel satisfied if we knew it must go stretching on for years and years?"

The tears shone in Mrs. Ashburton's eyes. Madge, seeing them, clasped her arms around her mother's neck, and kissed her fondly.

"My dear darling," said Mrs. Ashburton, "let us leave these things with God, and keep our own souls clean. It is a great comfort that we can trust Eleanor to walk in this perilous path."

Madge fell into a reverie. Life was an outgrowth, a continual development. "Behold I show you a mystery," said the apostle; "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." As well for this world as for that to come. The dull forms of doubt and unbelief that we grow out of, the shaping and the culture, the grace fresh from His hand that never fails. We could not even by taking heed find out God's ways until they come to pass. His wisdom was to be sufficient. We were to do the work He placed before us, and not to stray into by-paths in search of pleasanter pastures. His change would come in the appointed time. He had promised to make the righteousness of His children as clear as the light, and their just dealing as the noonday. It was waiting His time that He asked of us.

Quiet Riverside was presently startled by an incident that possessed peculiar interest for the little community. This was Mrs. Westlake's death, and the preparation for another funeral. The house had been closed since the

burial of her son's wife. Perhaps she felt that she could never thoroughly enjoy its beauty and luxury again. She had an innate shrinking from sickness and death, and all their sombre reminders.

Charles Westlake had gone abroad again, this time on business for a commercial house. His mother settled herself in a fashionable hotel, that she might not be deprived of society, even if the requirements of custom did demand some seclusion. The child and its nurse were under her supervision; but the one she desired most of all, for she did love her son passionately, and had schemed for the control of him and his affections, and he, she well understood, distrusted her. Yet she did not wholly despair. The very nobleness of his character would always lead him to pay her an outward respect, at least. And she held him at this advantage — her letters were frequent and tender. He should have no excuse for coldness.

Through the summer she had sunned herself at Saratoga and Newport. A handsome, haughty woman, looking young for her years, who had reigned as a queen in society for many past seasons, her wealth and position gave her a certain social prestige that she would never willingly relinquish. Attention and honor were as daily bread to her.

In the midst of her health, and strength, and pride, she had met a conquering foe. While riding one morning she had been thrown by a sudden and unmanageable fright in the horses, and picked up an insensible mass, bruised and injured beyond recovery, they thought at first. After a fortnight she began to rally, and sent an imperative summons to her son to hasten home at once.

Two months of suffering and anguish had been hers, and inexorable death had summoned her before she could have her wild prayer answered, and behold her son's face.

Through it all she would not believe that death was possible. and utterly refused to think of business until she could confer with him. She kept revolving some new

links in her mind wherewith to bind him; but it was not to be. The day before his arrival she had expired, suddenly. Perhaps it was best so. He could think then that she had it in her heart to make reparation for the evil she had wrought, and the wealth that had been her pride remained unfettered by any restrictions.

Another funeral procession wended its mournful way from the great house. There were throngs of stylish acquaintances, but few old friends or neighbors.

Catharine Day heard the particulars from the house-keeper. Miss Hetty repeated them to Madge.

"They have not been very lucky, it seems to me;" and the brisk voice fell to a lower key. "I sometimes wonder about these people, with their means and influence, and many opportunities of doing good. God takes account of it all, I suppose. Maybe there's some fruit that we don't see. And yet they might do so much! Perhaps I am a little envious for the Lord's sake, when there is so much to do."

Madge gave a tiny, quick smile of appreciation. The things that might be and were not, puzzled her also.

"I often think of young Mrs. Westlake. It was the eleventh hour, yet she did come in. She had the blessedness of the penny, the wages promised. There was given her a heart to do, even if the time was brief. But I am afraid the Madam was not of that kind. Though I don't believe she would have cared to live in such a terrible plight."

"Was it very bad?" Madge asked, timidly.

"She would have been a cripple for life, and quite disfigured, the nurse said. Her jaw was broken, and some of her beautiful teeth gone. She was very proud of them, and they were fine for her years. And her hip was so fractured that it never could have gone back in its place. I don't believe she would have enjoyed living after that. It takes a sight of grace to be happy when one is almost helpless. Mrs. Payson told Catharine she should not have known her, the accident had changed her so much."

"I am thankful, then, that Charlie did not see her!" Madge exclaimed, involuntarily. "She was a handsome woman, and he will like to keep the old remembrance of her."

"Yes. I have a strange kind of pity for him, as though he had not been quite rightly used. He was so different after his marriage, so grave and old-like, — you know what I mean, Madge, — as if the brightness of youth had all gone out of him. And it wasn't a bit natural. Maybe it is the foreign air. I've noticed it in some other faces. To my mind, there's nothing like a sweet, cheerful home to keep people content. God set them in families, and He meant it to be their first duty and joy."

"The place will be very lonely," said Madge, following out her own thoughts.

"No doubt he will sell it and go away. He said last autumn that it could never be home to him again. But he is young and rich, with all the world before him. I hope he will marry a good, sweet-natured woman, and be happy. I can't bear to think of lives that might be noble, flawed and spoiled by the wrong setting."

Madge felt the warm blood rush to her face.

"I wonder if he will drop in to see me. He was so cordial the last time! We sat over there in the old room — he would go there. 'Miss Hetty,' said he, 'there is hardly a spot in the world that has such a cosy, inviting look as this. I hope you will never change it. I do believe, if I was ever sick, I should come here to be taken care of.' I never told you of that before, my dear;" and she gave her little cheerful laugh.

The soft eyes were averted then, and the trembling lips could make no comment. Was it the old charm that drew him here, and would he come to Miss Hetty in his new sorrow? — this tender, motherly woman, to whom God had given the love and the gifts without the thing itself. Surely her rare insight was a diviner quality than many another's actual experience.

They sat and talked in the lingering twilight. The wide hall became shadowy, and the pauses seemed to hold a strange mystery in their silences. Madge felt her heart beat with great, irregular bounds. Some inward prescience told her that if her fate came not presently, it would never come at all.

Ah! had she hoped?

She could not deny it to herself. Yet if it never reached her?

Back in the past she might have been content. But to come so near, to see what should have been hers bestowed elsewhere!

A coldness and a shivering seized her. Could it pass her by a second time?

There was the home and the affection, the duties that were pleasant and satisfying yesterday, and brought their own sweet reward,—would they not suffice for a life? Some souls, with the great longing of hers, had not even these guests to fill the solitary spaces.

They heard the gate open and shut, as if some rather awkward fingers were at it.

“For me, I dare say;” and Madge sprang up. “Good night, dear Miss Hetty.”

“Let me get a light. Why, I wonder where Catharine is all this time! And I had no idea it was so dark!”

“Never mind. Good night again;” this time with a kiss.

“My dear, wait; it may be a visitor, instead.”

That was a risk which Madge did not care to face. She wanted nothing beyond her own thoughts. Any ordinary conversation would be intolerable to her now.

“No, I must go. I come so often, you know.”

Miss Hetty was fumbling for matches. She loved the twilight so well that the hall was generally lighted the last. Madge went down the steps and through the small, old-fashioned door-yard in breathless haste. Just as she

reached the gate, a long ray of light flashed after her, illuminating the narrow perspective of shrubbery, and falling on the figure standing there, whose head was partially bowed. She paused abruptly.

"Madge!" the voice said, in a kind of strained underbreath. "Miss Ashburton!"

A cry rose in her throat, but she did not utter it. The profoundness of her emotion held her like a spell. Was her question to be answered here and now? She shrank sensitively from either alternative.

"I heard your voice. I was coming to see Miss Hetty. It was the thing nearest you. I said to myself, She may have been here to-day. O, Madge!"

He opened the gate for her, and, like one in a dream, she passed through. He lingered to shut it, and — was it for some sign from her? She stood quite still. All the life in her seemed to stop and crowd around her heart, bringing an awful solemnity. One little word could turn the current either way. In the bright, by-gone years she could have spoken it; now she must listen; it was the part left for her, the part that had followed her waiting.

"Madge, my darling!"

He took her hand then and drew it through his arm, and they fell into step mechanically. The warm blood rushed back to her face, and she felt the exultant life throbbing through every pulse.

"I could not have dreamed of this blessedness. That I should meet you here, at this very gate, where we said, years ago — do you remember? — that whatever came, we would keep our faith in each other! And I failed miserably. Madge, can you forgive? God knows that my heart never wavered. I think you understand —"

"Enough to absolve you from premeditated wrong," she answered, eagerly, hastening to justify him in his own eyes, since he had been cleared in hers long before.

"I had not counted on so sudden an explanation, my

dearest Madge, and it seems strange to have it in the shadow of a new sorrow, like that which has befallen me again. Yet in this freedom I think I have a right to the whole truth. After it is once spoken we will shut it in the graves with the dead."

"If it gives you pain — Oh, I can, I do believe in you," she answered, incoherently; the very depths of her soul stirred by the tumult of feeling that she could not wholly grasp.

"God bless you, Madge, for the faith. It has been my keenest misery, all through these years, to think of your suffering. You had enough, surely, without my adding to it. Yet I could make no sign. You had to believe the worst."

"O, it is past now," she said, with a little cry, realizing the strength of her own love, and the joy of its late fruition. Why should she not rejoice that it had come? Was bliss so ordinary a thing that one should take it without thanks?

"I want to tell you — for my own satisfaction. I have said this over to myself so many times during the last year, planning how I would come after a while! For May saw it clearly with her dying eyes. The sin was not all hers."

"No, no," Madge answered, hurriedly.

"Perhaps I made the first mistake in not confessing the exact truth; yet I withheld it from the purest delicacy. I knew she loved me, and that it was my mother's wish that I should marry her. I fancied it possible to change her regard by persistently showing her that I had only a brother's love to give. I cannot tell you how I used to long for my exile to come to an end. Letters missed now and then, not wholly by accident, I fear. O, my darling, many a time I grew heart-sick with the delay; but I dared not give my impatience words, even to you. And then came that request for freedom, nay, a demand, leaving me no choice. We had heard a story before of your intended marriage. She told you, I think."

"Yes. O, let it all go," pleaded the tremulous voice.

"I have a man's desire to be justified in the eyes of the woman I love. How could I dream of deception? The direction on the envelope and the post-mark were convincing. They could not be counterfeited. That the brief note might have been, never occurred to me. In my anguish and despair I yielded to the love that longed to comfort me. It was as tender and considerate as its nature could produce. When I reached New York we heard many things of which you *had* kept me in ignorance, and the great truth that well nigh crushed me. O, Madge, you can never know the powerful temptation that beset me to come once and clear myself in your eyes! I writhed under that foul stain. All my own life appeared swept away; it was only crumbs and fragments of another. I tried earnestly to do my duty. In the sad, sweet days towards the last, she absolved me. We spoke of you often. O, Madge, I think she understood then the strength of a man's love for the woman who can strike the key-note of his soul. You will not grudge what I gave her then?"

"O, do not believe me that selfish!" cried Madge. "It was all hers."

"My faith, and truth, and devotion were. She knew when I married her that the sweetest had been given to another. I did not deceive her. God knows that I tried to render her happy in her way, which never could have been mine, and she was happier than if I had not married her. That is my only comfort in the dreary waste. And she understood what must come afterwards — it was her wish."

Madge was trembling in the strong arm that held her, and her tears dropped quietly.

"She felt that she could trust her little girl with you. She told me that she had made you promise to love her. Will you do it a little for my sake, Madge? This is not so glad a betrothal as that of our early youth, but, God

helping, it shall prove a happier one. Thank Him that the season of bloom does not end in May!"

He took her hand in his, with the stars above them for witnesses, then, bending over her, he kissed the throbbing lips that had kept their troth-plight so sacredly.

"I was thankful to go away again. I could not remain and deny myself the sight of your dear face. Some time I meant to return and ask honorably for your love. God has settled it in his own way. There are only us two to bury the ghosts of the past and begin a new life. My darling!"

It was said without any words. In the future they might talk gladly and freely again, but to-night both hearts were sore and sad, as they must needs be when stirred to the depths of past pain.

They had reached Home Nook by this time. She paused and asked him in.

"Not to-night, dearest. I want to be alone a little while with my great happiness. To-morrow, when we have become used to the joy, we will share it with the others. There is so much for you to help me plan and decide!"

One tender, clinging clasp, with uncounted kisses. All the missing years seemed to crowd in and add intensity.

After she had parted with him she went swiftly up to her own room. Was it true? Had she come to this great blessedness at last? The one love for which she must have always hungered in the secret depths of her woman's heart, even though she suffered herself to be fed outwardly, and smiled in apparent content.

"O, God, I thank thee!"

It was all her prayer. Other petitions and thanksgivings might come presently, but this was sufficient now. The keenest, sweetest joys cannot multiply themselves with many words. Only those who live outside of their emotions and feelings need a wide audience.

The Ashburtons were not much surprised when Charlie

Westlake presented himself. Had he been still more at fault they would have forgiven him cordially for the sake of Madge's brilliantly happy face. She seemed to have blossomed royally in a single night, like some rare plant. They all rejoiced in her joy, knowing that perfect content could have come in no other manner.

But Miss Hetty was more than surprised. She made Madge tell the story again and again, and interrupted it frequently with her quaint comments.

"To think that I shouldn't have suspected! But you were such a child then! And he used to drop in to talk about your mother, and Jessie, and Philip. Child, I believe every one who has come within your reach has felt the blessed influence of home. Your mother has been a light to the world, though she has hardly gone outside of her own house. But she put candles here and there to shine, and they gave no uncertain light."

"Dear mamma!" said Madge. "If we can do our duty as nobly!"

"It does come out right if we wait God's time. Our foolish fussing and planning only hinder. We see just to-day, and He can look at all the great to-morrows, and the life beyond that. But I am so glad for you. It seems to me that you are one of the women who understand the pure joy of living and loving soul to soul. I used to wonder about it, and pray a little, for I couldn't bear to think of your going through life uncrowned. And I am thankful for Mr. Westlake. You can't have all the joy to yourself. He is worthy of you, if ever man was. You won't be ashamed to set him beside Mr. Graham, or your brothers, either."

He would not suffer in comparison with any of them. The years had refined and ennobled him. Perhaps love might have added the more generous warmth and bloom, but the sorrow had sanctified.

There was, as he had said, much to think about. He came

in the Ashburtons' midst as he had in the old time, brightening with every smile they gave him. What they were to do was quite openly discussed, for by another spring he wanted all in readiness for Madge.

Mrs. Westlake's elegant habits and luxurious living had made some inroads in her fortune, but there was still a considerable sum left. The house would be sold, for both Madge and Charlie desired to begin life anew, and have a home free from unpleasant associations.

"And I shall settle myself in business," he said. "I have lost the boyish ambition to distinguish myself, and I am persuaded that I can live as noble and worthy a life in some other calling. For a few years we will enjoy our home and each other, and if we need changes afterwards, we can have them."

Madge assented. Whatever contented him would satisfy her. There was no fear of his degenerating by any contact with the world.

Little Alice was brought up to Home Nook for a visit — a bright, winsome child, with a certain infantile prettiness that was very engaging. She was sure to find a tender mother in Madge, whose range of feeling and affection was too broad and rich for any petty jealousy.

"She will always be a sacred trust to me," Madge said to her mother. "I do feel that my experiences have been fitting me for this duty in an especial manner. And I hope God will give me sufficient grace never to desire to crowd her out of her father's heart. He surely has love enough for both, and I cannot question my part."

"So He brings them to the haven where they would be," replied Mrs. Ashburton, with a tender cadence.

"Yes, mamma. Yet I sometimes wonder how I dare be so happy. My heart goes back to the lightness of sixteen. I forget about the years in the wilderness."

"As it is right that you should. God gives us the past for lessons, but he does not mean that we shall shadow

the future nor the present with it. He brings to each day its work and its reward."

"And we only need Nelly to complete the picture. If my life reaches such blessed fruition, is it wrong to hope for her?"

"We will leave that with God."

"Mamma, I want the whole world to be happy."

"A very pleasant desire, truly;" and Mrs. Ashburton smiled.

Their prayers went up daily for Eleanor. In her distant home she was bearing loneliness, fatigue, and the daily trials with uncomplaining bravery. The beginning of the end had surely come. Yet even here, separated from those so dear to her, shut out from the tenderest sympathy, she still gave thanks that she had seen her duty so clearly, and hastened to it with willing hands.

Gerald Copeland would die much as he had lived. His was a narrow, selfish, exacting nature. Youth and affluence had given it a semblance of generous feeling, but he only parted with what he did not want, or gave to get a double portion in return. He never considered any incident as it might affect others, but always himself. If he lost interest in a person or a pursuit, Eleanor must relinquish it without a sigh.

Madge and Charlie were frequent visitors at the Grahams. Jessie was more than delighted with the turn of events. The new home was to be in the city for a few years, and the two took an eager, almost childish delight in its adornment. The beautiful pictures, statuary, and some of the furniture had been reserved, and were to adapt themselves to new niches.

Indeed, the lovers seemed to bring youth and sunshine to them all. It is one of the best and rarest gifts of human souls to be able to go back to the blooming May of faith, and belief, and anticipation; to take up the broken warp, and unite it with so cunning a hand that one shall scarcely see the joining.

What more? That they were happy you will imagine. That there came some crosses, some burdens, and a few sacrifices, you know as well, for no life is exempt. To the brave, earnest, active ones there is always a changing current. The mariner beats up the waves with his slender oar, and guides the bark over billows, while the idle pleasure-seeking passenger may lie in the stern asleep. But for the watchful eye and firm hand he might drift to destruction.

And though our times and seasons, that stretch out to some far point we call the limit of human existence, may seem of immeasurable importance to us, in the great and infinite cycles of God's thought we are like a little dream, only we could not have been but for His thought of us. And so He not only shapes our lives, but gives us a work to do. Happy he who hears at the last the blessed words, "Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these, ye have done it unto me."



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 128 129 4

